Noise Breaking

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/36805954.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
M/M

Fandom:
Karate Kid (Movies)

Relationship:
Daniel LaRusso/Johnny Lawrence

Characters:
Johnny Lawrence, Daniel LaRusso

Additional Tags:
1994

Language:
English

Series:
Part 2 of Tuning

Stats:
Published: 2022-02-01 Completed: 2022-10-10 Words: 162,782
Chapters: 101/101

Noise Breaking

by menocchio

Summary

X

Chapter 1: A Terrible Beginning

On the morning of the day he gets fired from Aalders & Bray, he wakes up with his body already singing with tension, keening for relief. He has surely dislocated something, or maybe left a critical part of himself behind – probably at the office.

He opens heavy eyelids to the jaundiced cast of his bedroom. There is an ache in his ear, a tightness in his jaw he can't force-relax; he sits up on the edge of the bed and puts pads of fingers to the hinge of the joint; tries stretching his mouth, rotating it. He feels like the word, blunted on one end and exposed on the other: *jawjawjaw.* His head is top-heavy. Give it a shove and it'll roll from his neck and go bouncing across the room. It is 6 AM and there is an accident blocking I-5 northbound at—

He reaches to turn off the alarm.

He has to tell himself what to do, otherwise he won't move. This involves lying in both directions. You'll feel better if you do this; okay, I'll feel better if I do this. It also involves begging, but the worst kind: a last resort. Begging as a loss of control, with no trust, hope, or belief. To the world: let this make it better. And world says nothing, but what choice is there. World doesn't care if he takes a shower or brushes his teeth or shaves or applies that new aftershave or runs styling cream back through his hair or what shirt and tie he chooses to wear. It doesn't care, but he feels the consequences of choosing wrong are still ruinous. It is 6:55 AM.

He makes a Bloody Mary out in the kitchen, heavy on the tomato juice and heavier on the vodka.

The company Golf starts up sluggish. He grits his teeth as he reverses slowly out of his parking spot. He knows there is something wrong with the car – *has* known there is something wrong with it for a couple weeks – but doesn't feel like he can say anything because saying something sounds like making a demand. He isn't in any position at work to make demands. So he has said nothing.

But still, the acceleration just isn't where it should be. People wait two or three seconds on the street before irritably passing him: the sound of their superior engines opening up behind, the growing roar and harsh shriek of a horn as they cut back in front of the Golf, and it all blends in with the rest of the morning traffic merging onto the

freeway. It is 7:15. He might be late.

He folds two pieces of spearmint gum between his teeth, and his jaw bone audibly pops.

Downtown, construction is happening across from the office, and those guys start early, they've been at it for hours already. The sound of the jackhammers and earth-movers and clanging fill the whole block, are completely unignorable even as everyone else on the street seems to disagree.

They also agree not to see the workers themselves: unshaven cheeks and thick hands, strong arms streaked with dust and grime. There, a broad pair of shoulders flexing beneath a sweat-stained T-shirt. Standing and moving around, confident in what they're doing and why shouldn't they be. They don't look over as he walks down the sidewalk; their eyes aren't drawn to a passing suit. He feels shrunken and ghostly under a morning sun which cannot reach to warm what is not there.

It is 8:10 AM. Late again.

"*John*," says Rich, and he turns from pouring his coffee, leading with his eyebrow.

Rich hustles up beside him at the break room counter, mouth pursed in barely contained amusement, eyes gleeful. He looks around the room, and John's eyes follow automatically even though he already knows it is empty; he checked before coming in, in case Gerry was in here.

"So I took out Sharon," he says, and when John doesn't instantly react, he prompts a little impatiently, "you know, from the fourth floor? The one with," and he gestures, expansively.

John watches his hands trace a figure through the air. He smirks. "Really? And how the fuck did you manage that?"

"Caught her in an empty elevator after work. Persistence is key, my man – keep telling you to use that for acquisitions. Anyway, got her to agree to a little after-work drink, and before you know it," and he gives a smug look; gestures again.

“No way, man,” he says, because he knows his lines.

Rich scoffs and elbows him aside to get at the coffee maker. “Oh, *yeah*. She agreed to sharing a cab, it was easy from there – and speaking of easy, it was like fucking a wet sponge, she was wringing it out for me before I even got a hand up there—”

“Wow,” said John, nodding. “*Hot*, man. Yeah, that's—”

“John,” says Gerry, appearing in the doorway.

John steps away from the counter, immediately at attention. “Gerry. Good morning.”

“Is it?” he says, and: “Come into my office for a minute, would you.” He looks between them with eyes flat and grey like a pair of coins. “When you're done in here, I mean.”

“Uh oh,” says Rich, snickering over the top of his mug once Gerry has moved on. He tosses John a wink and heads for the door.

John flips him off belatedly, but he can't unstick his eyes enough to roll them in accompaniment for the act; what little ease in his expression he can assemble dies a quick death the moment Rich has turned his back.

He is left alone staring at the table of picked-over muffins Janice from HR always brings in on Wednesdays. He had come in here meaning to grab one, since he hadn't had any solid food since the previous afternoon, but suddenly he isn't sure he can make himself swallow.

The ultimatum from Gerry is pretty straightforward: if he doesn't shape up soon, they're going to fire him. He says he's trying to give John a chance to prove himself, which is why he's taking him along to the lunch meeting with Guess that afternoon. He wants John to drive.

“You always drive this slow?” Gerry asks critically as they fail to make a second green light. “You have to be more aggressive in this city. You can't wait for someone to just give you an opening.”

“Yeah, I know,” says John. “I'm – I agree. Strike first, strike hard. Absolutely. It's just, uh – the car, well. It's—”

Gerry turns in the passenger seat to scrutinize him. “If there's a mechanical issue with the car, you should have reported it.” His tone sharpens, turning suspicious and accusatory. “You know you don't own this car, John. It's the company's, and you're privileged for even getting to drive it – you need to treat it with more responsibility than the Ford Escort your *mommy* and *daddy* gave you when you got your license, okay?”

The light turns green, and John switches from the brake to the gas pedal. He says through numb lips, “I know, I know. I wasn't – I mean, sorry. I know.”

“I mean, *jesus*. What if we were driving a client today?” Gerry demands. “Do we want them thinking this is the kind of performance the company can provide?”

“Of course, you're right,” he says quickly, and he doesn't hear himself, doesn't recognize the creature speaking; at this moment, he does not technically exist. “I'll file the report as soon as we get back to the office.”

He drives the rest of the quarter mile to the restaurant; it takes them ten minutes to find parking, and Gerry seems to charge blame by the second. By the time they are standing outside of the car, John can feel the damp inside his suit jacket; he has already soaked his undershirt with sweat. He imagines he can smell it when he moves his arm to lock the doors.

Gerry debriefs him as they walk out of the parking garage. “We know they've already heard a pitch from SG&P, and I just bet Alan Woodley gave a good reach-around. So the rule today is – anything.”

“Anything?” says John.

“If the team from Guess decide they'd like to try human veal,” says Gerry, emphatic, “I expect you to grab a knife and the nearest child and start cutting. That clear enough for you, John-boy?”

He slaps John's arm and turns to cross the street to the restaurant before coming to an abrupt halt. He stares above the moving line of the Santa Monica Freeway, and his hands clench into fists. John follows his gaze to the large billboard standing above the rush of traffic: stark black lettering on white background, imposing in its simplicity or so the art department had said when they wouldn't shut the fuck up about it for a week.

“Those fucking cocksuckers,” says Gerry tightly. He shakes out his shoulders like someone trying to regain his nerve. “We'll get them. Just wait, we'll get them.”

John thinks if he has to hear one more word about the *Got Milk?* campaign, he'll volunteer to feed the Guess team his own liver. He stays silent.

Inside the restaurant, the introductions are all made, *here's one of our most promising junior account executives, John Lawrence*, and he has to focus to remember the names and which belong to who, and who around the table is clearly top dog. Randall White, Jason Kent Smith, and Allison Hart-Meyer. Top dog: clearly Smith. Man has three names and chooses to deploy them all in a group setting.

They order. Talk starts with families, the usual testing ground where they check in around the table that everyone present is normal.

John typically remains pretty quiet during this portion of the conversation; he has a reputation as a ladies man around the office, and Gerry usually explains him away with a jocular but dismissive, *oh John? He's never going to settle down, quite the eligible bachelor.* Back in the office, the talk has always carried the implicit advice that he'll need to flip the script eventually.

Today, however, one of the Guess team has a son, and that son has just started taking karate.

“Oh, John here used to do karate – he won a few tournaments, even. Back in. uh.”

“The valley,” says John.

“And you know, they even showed one of his fights on ESPN,” says Gerry, and the table makes polite, interested sounds that make his nerves shrivel with an almost physical revulsion. Gerry flicks a finger at John, smiling. “Oh, tell 'em about it, John. It's fun stuff.”

It isn't fun stuff; it's hard to explain why a fighter who won a well-publicized match would stop fighting immediately thereafter.

“It was nothing,” he tries to say, and Gerry's smile doesn't turn hard at the edges, he's too controlled for that, but a light in his eyes tells him he better try harder. John straightens up in his seat, hands tightening on his thighs beneath the table. “But um, it was back in '86 – so ancient history, really. I don't even know if the PKA is still around.”

Jason Kent Smith takes a drink and says, “Do you know Arthur Davie?” And Gerry goes *oh yeah, I know Art.* Smith nods. “Used to head up his own little ad agency, started promoting sporting events a year or two ago. He's helped put on a couple tournaments recently, they sound interesting.”

“Karate?” says John, because he doesn't know what else to say.

Smith shrugs expansively. “No, no. Everything, I think – no holds barred.”

Which makes no sense; John squints. Everything? What does that even mean?

“That's great,” says Gerry heartily, meanwhile. “Let's break down those barriers, that's what I say.”

John nods vaguely. He fiddles with his fork over his side salad and eats a few bites – but he can't let it go. The question seeps down into the soil of his brain; finds something to latch onto and fester.

“What do you mean *everything*?” he says loudly.

A second or so later, he realizes the conversation had actually moved on; his brain catches up with reports from his ears and he realizes he has, in fact, interrupted a conversation about school districts or something equally pointless.

“I mean,” he says, faltering and dry-mouthed. “About – restructuring? What does, uh. What does that mean? That sounds bad. For our kids.”

Allison Hart-Meyer narrows her eyes across the table at him. “I thought you didn't have kids?”

And then for some reason – body tensing and something within him bubbling over in a frothy frenzy of fucked up fear – he lies? And says he does? Which means making up a story about an out-of-wedlock conception? But he explains it in a really weird way? Like, somehow he makes himself out to be both weirdly religious *and* a womanizer? Which is probably one of the less good combinations.

The lunch goes badly from there, because he also doesn't actually know anything about children, or school, or the basics of society, apparently. And Gerry watches him the whole time, knowing the truth, and John can feel in his gut with growing hysteria – it's over, he's over, it's all over? He's over? It's—

Chapter 2: It Gets Worse

Gerry is silent on the drive back to the office. When John pulls into the parking garage, he stops him from killing the engine. He tells him to take the rest of the day, that he'll call him with the partners' final decision sometime that evening.

John can't even make himself beg for the job. It's too late for that. He can feel it in the crush of the too-small car around him, the darkness of the garage pressing against the glass.

It's too late.

He goes through a drive-thru on the way home and orders three big macs, a supersized fries and soda, and his stomach hates him for it. He nearly throws up over the gear stick on the freeway and has to haul the car frantically onto the shoulder of the road. He sits there for a few minutes with his lips pinched tight and head stuck out the cracked door, his product-stiff hair slowly folding forward to drop before his eyes. The afternoon traffic roars past only a couple feet away, violent and unceasing.

After a while, the roiling in his gut abates enough that he can ease back into the car and shut the door. The sight of the fast food debris on the passenger seat threatens to bring it back, so he sweeps the wrappers hard into the foot well. The seat leather gets streaked with grease and salt.

He gets home and it's not even 3 o'clock. The light in his living room looks alien and a little sheepish, like he is seeing something he shouldn't.

He switches the television on to fill the silence, and Alex Trebek takes control of the space, his voice unendingly mild and somehow relentless.

In the kitchen, he knocks back a couple Tylenol with a tall glass of water. He notices a light blinking on his answering machine.

Gerry already? At least the execution will be swift. He hopes he just comes out and says it into the machine; John doesn't know what he'll do if he has to call him back and take it over the phone. He might just not. He might sit here instead, for as long as it takes for the walls to collapse in around him.

He tries that, but the commercial break in the other room ends and Trebek is back at it announcing categories, reminding him of time passing. There is no standing still, no matter how hard he tries.

He looks at the machine for a minute before finally reaching over to stab the play button. His hands tap the counter restlessly, his leg bounces against the cupboards below. His stomach twists.

“Oto, pertains to the ear,” says Trebek, “sono pertains to sound – and this pertains to hearing *and* sound.”

Mr. Lawrence, says the machine, and John's breath catches.

His voice is rich and slow like distant thunder. Even recorded on a tape coming through a tiny speaker, the sound of it buries John, immobilizing him against the counter. He has to focus to blot out the sound of Jeopardy in the other room so he can hear every word:

Long time, he says, and John can picture the imprint at the corner of his firm mouth. *Too long. It's time we mend bridges – I'm calling because there have been some recent... developments. I'd like it if you could stop by the dojo. We should talk it all over.*

“On October 4th, 1957, this sitcom starring Jerry Mathers premiered.”

The address is the same. It'll be good to get a look at you.

He doesn't say goodbye. The message ends and the machine clicks off and John blinks.

He finds himself hanging forward over the counter. He is slow in sinking backwards and putting his weight on his feet again. He rubs his face. *Fuck*.

A Daily Double is announced in the other room. The music cue is shattered by the sound of the phone ringing; he almost jumps. He stares wildly at the phone and goes someplace in his head and when he comes back, the ringing has stopped and a voice is coming over the machine.

This time, it is Gerry.

He can't stay in the apartment. This becomes clear immediately. The

apartment belongs to a guy with a job, somebody with goals and coworkers and a salary and a future, and he is not that guy, he just looks like him sometimes.

He leaves so fast, he doesn't even change out of his work clothes. And he has to take the Golf, which does not belong to him, because he is between cars at the moment; he has been putting off buying a personal vehicle for months, not wanting to confront the inevitable moment at a dealership lot where he looks at a Toyota Corolla or something and goes *yes, that one.* That final moment of defeat.

He drives home to the valley.

But he can't go home. And he can't go *home* because he doesn't want to show up at the dojo in his current state. His mind cringes back from the idea. He thinks if he went there now and met Sensei's eyes, the truth would be read in an instant, offering confirmation of all his failures. No, he can't go home.

He finds a bar instead.

Rosaline's, the name in red neon cursive over a squat shoebox of a building, like lipstick on a pig. It doesn't have any windows, and someone with a sense of humor lined the wall above the bar with clocks showing the different times around the world, just in case the day drinkers of Reseda desperately need to know what time it is in London or Verona.

John starts with an Old Fashioned, and takes it slow at first. His stomach is still protesting the earlier part of the day.

He sits at the bar and turns the round glass between his hands, trying to relax. He should've chosen a different bar, he thinks. He doesn't fit here; he doesn't know where he fits. The low conversations happening around him make him feel uneasy in his skin, shivery and nervous like people might be staring. He is too aware of his body every time he lifts the glass.

It gets better after a few drinks. A little.

Her name is Marilyn or Marion, or maybe even Marty? and she might be a dyke for all she seems to actually want him, which is fair.

She's got short red hair, can't even call it a pixie-cut because there's something distinctly *not cute* about it – it looks blunt, blunt like her snub nose and hard jaw, blunt like the look in her eyes that sees a short road ahead, blunt like the way she said *so let's fuckin' go* in his ear inside the bar after he said he had nowhere to be in the morning, after she said *you mean you don't got a bedtime* after he told her he'd been fired from his job.

She is drunk and so is he, but they don't let that stop them. After all, this is the only way either of them are getting any tonight. It's a Wednesday (still?) and they're both kinda fucked up.

She pulls him by the tie out the front door of the bar, and it's dark outside. A pair of smokers laugh at their backs. He grabs for her waist but she puts an end to that real quick by driving an elbow down on his forearm. Hard. He can take direction so he follows her at a weaving remove, content to be towed along like a broke down car on the side of the road. Except for—

“This one's mine,” he says, when she looks like she's going to walk past it.

She casts an incurious look over her shoulder at him and then to the side, where the Golf is sitting on the street. She stumbles to a stop and he's a beat late in following; her fist brushes his chest.

“That's not big enough,” she says.

“God, I know,” he says, and then her tongue is on his mouth demanding entry, and he takes her meaning. He twists his head. “Wait, here?”

She steps back and looks at him with a dark challenge in her eye. “I'm not going home with you, and you're sure as fuck are not coming back to my place.”

Okay, so: here.

The back seat is a tough fit, and they only make it work because neither of them care about the little things, like John repeatedly bumping into the back of the front seats and banging his knees in the footwells, or MarilynMarionMarty scraping her head on the ceiling a few times. He gets his slacks open and cock out and a condom on and

she gets her jeans down to her knees and bends over into the tiny trunk space.

He's wavering a little at this point. He shoves a hand up her shirt, baring a stretch of torso just flat enough to apparently not need a bra: clean, straight lines like a smallish guy maybe, and okay okay, just—

She shoves her knees tight into the crease of the back seat and tilts her hips, gives an irritated grunt as he sinks into her. Her hands scrabble fruitlessly for something to hold on to, so she can shove back on him.

“Fuck,” they both mutter, and it's not, like, *great*. But it goes alright for a few minutes. They are both moving, anyway. He shoves his hips forward, driving her into the back of the seat, and it has the shape and form of fucking. And what's hotter than this, fucking in a car on a street in the middle of a city? Touching another warm body?

Except something is wrong below. John fucks forward and he *bends* and it *hurts*, and – wait, fuck.

“Fuck,” he says, stuttering to a halt and frantically grasping to catch the twisted, torn condom. He doesn't have to pull out so much as pull away, and his cock is depressingly soft: positively wounded and possibly wondering why he was doing this to it.

“What?” she says, and she twists her head around before he can answer.

She looks down at the torn condom in his hand and even in the darkness of the car's interior, he swears he can see her pale. Her eyes widen; her lips part.

“Wait,” he says, and it's a good thing his hand is already sheltering his cock, because she *fucking freaks out.*

Chapter 3: Fuck This Shit

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she shouts, and *christ*.

She twists away from him, smacking up into the low roof of the Golf again. She grabs for the belt of her jeans, like she can erase the moment by covering her ass, and hey, if that's how it worked, well. Life for everyone would be a lot different, wouldn't it.

“It's not – look, it's not my fault,” he says, and that's a mistake, because then she *really* starts screaming, starts hitting his shoulders and chest.

John lands on the seat beside her, turning to take the blows with the broad side of his shoulder. She calls him a faggot and a prick, and it spikes something inside him, he can't not respond. It's too overwhelming. He has to strike back.

“Jesus, I didn't even come!” he shouts in response to her frenzy, raising his arms to block the rain of blows. “And – and I'm *clean*, okay – I got tested,” and here he fatally stalls out, trying to remember the date or even the month, but it's pointless, nothing can make it more reassuring; it's like the date on his dick is past its expiration, and she won't know if she's good until she doesn't get sick.

She doesn't take the pause in stride; in fact, she bolts out of the car like he has unpinned a grenade. Maybe he shouldn't have mentioned getting tested; it was a bit of a giveaway, a confirmation of sorts.

He slumps over his bare thighs and rubs his temples, thinking the whole humiliating scene is over, at least.

Then she throws a rock through his windshield.

The glass shatters and he dives out the open side of the car – gets tangled in the open slacks falling down his bare legs and goes face-first onto the sidewalk. He twists around, fighting the chaos of the moment and hauling his pants up over his bare ass, and now he's shouting right back up at her *you crazy fucking bitch* and oh, she doesn't like that.

He has just pushed up onto his knees when she takes the butterfly knife from her jeans. His eyes bug out; his mouth sags open.

For real? *This* is how he's going to die?

All he can think is that he wishes didn't have his wallet with him or the registration in the car. He'd rather go out as a John Doe than a John Lawrence. Maybe someone will rob his body? Man, Reseda is a lot rougher than he remembers.

“Teach you how to treat a woman,” she says, and she neatly stabs the front passenger tire of the Golf.

John sits heavily back on his ankles. He stares as the tire rapidly hisses its air out into the world. Meanwhile, the woman flips the butterfly knife closed and pockets it and runs off down the sidewalk in the opposite direction from the bar.

Fucking psycho bitch, he thinks numbly; no wonder his cock went soft. It probably sensed the danger.

After about half a minute, other sounds from the street start to trickle back into his awareness – mostly the smokers outside Rosaline's talking about the fight. They enjoyed the show but thought it was over too soon; they want to know if there will be an encore.

John lets his eyes run over the Golf again: the now-flat tire causing the whole frame to sag down and rest on the rim of the wheel, the glittering jagged hole in the center of the windshield.

He shrugs his shoulders, hauling his jacket roughly up from where it had fallen down his arms. He stands and takes an unsteady step forward towards the car; stops again.

What's there to do? There's nothing to do. The car is fucked. Not even his car, and now he's going to have to pay for it anyway, and he doesn't even like it. In fact, he hates this car. He hates its pathetic little trunk and sensible grey paint and he hates its stereo system and he really hates how it drives—

He twists his hip and kicks the back door shut. He follows it up with planting the flat of his foot on the side of the car: once, twice, three times, he keeps at it until the paneling dents and crumples.

Oh shit, he's trashing his own car says a smoker.

Wrong, he wants to shout triumphantly back as he keeps kicking: this – is – not – John's – car!

Breathing hard, he stalks to the front of the Golf, kicking at the fender above the busted tire on the way. He slams his fists on the hood a couple times and brings his foot down on the bumper repeatedly until it shrieks into the night and tears off the frame.

He screams down at it until his vocal cords feel like they're going to rip apart. He hates this car. Fuck this car. *He hates this fucking car.* Fucking European import piece of fuel-injected shit.

He climbs onto the dented hood and kicks in the rest of the spider-cracked windshield, heedless of the tearing hem of his slacks. Then he scrambles on top of the roof and tries to jump down as hard as he can, imagining in the thrill of adrenaline that he might actually be able to crush the whole vehicle beneath his feet: once, twice, three—

His stupid loafers skid over the metal, and he falls back on his ass, thumps and slides off the car and smacks down onto the pavement of the street, and he's done.

He groans and coughs and lies still for a while.

“Hey, man,” says someone, and he drags the words out: half in humor and half because he sounds smashed: *heyyyy maaaan.* A foot taps his head. “Dude, you dead? I think he's dead.”

“He ain't dead. Look at his foot. It's twitching.”

“Bodies move sometimes after death. I read about that somewhere. Haven't you ever heard of a chicken running around like its head's cut off? Why do you think they say that?”

“This guy ain't no chicken.”

“You think chickens can do it but we can't? We got more nerve endings than a chicken.”

John grunts and raises his head. Inch by grinding inch, he pushes onto his forearms. He squints up into the night and two young guys in matching Angels jerseys squint back. Their cigarettes glow and wink at him.

“You cool, buddy?” says the one on the left.

“Ain't seen nothing like that before,” says the one on the right.

John makes a vague, incurious sound. The two men look at each other and shrug. They toss their cigarettes into the street and bend to help him up.

Back inside Rosaline's, they set him down on a stool and slap a beer in front of him – some kind of cheap lager shit, but he doesn't care. The cold of the can feels good against his abraded palm and swelling fingers.

“You good, dude?” asks one of the guys. When John just silently nods, they shrug and move down the bar, leaving him alone.

He drinks his beer and stares up at the clocks on the wall above the bar. It is almost 11 AM in Cairo, Egypt right now. Someone there has slept in, is only just waking up to tomorrow.

John digs a clumsy knuckle hard into his burning eye. He sniffs. He tips his head back to drain the rest of the beer, and then he asks the bartender for another, and a phone, and the number of a towing company.

It takes the truck almost an hour to get there, by which point John has had another four beers and wandered out to sit on the curb beside the wreck of the Golf. His hands are stiffening up pretty bad, and his pant leg is a little wet with blood, though when he checks his ankle the cut doesn't seem that bad. Already beginning to clot.

He shuts his eyes as the tow truck eases up behind the Golf, its headlights at the perfect height to blind him. A door creaks open and the driver hops out onto the street, whistling far too cheerfully for the hour. The whistle stops as he takes in the state of the Golf, and then comes again: low and long like he is impressed. He steps around the car, boots crunching over the broken glass when he reaches the front and studies the mess of the hood.

John takes a deep breath and blinks down at the pavement between his loafers. His hair hangs down lank in front of his eyes, tickling his nose. He waits.

“Man, looks like somebody got into a fistfight with your car,” calls the driver, and then he pauses, reflective. “And I think the car somehow

lost?”

“Yeah, whatever, man," says John, defeated. "Just – take it. Let's do this.”

John shuts his eyes again and tries to think. He's going to get the Golf taken away so he'll never have to look at it again, and then he's going to call a cab and go home and go to sleep and not think about having to wake up ever again. This is his new life plan. It's perfect. Foolproof.

More crunching glass and gravel as the driver completes his circuit of the Golf. He stops to take in the punctured tire and whistles again – and then the whistle dies, the sharp short note collapsing out until it's nothing but air.

“Wait – *Johnny*? That you?”

And Johnny looks up.

Chapter 4: . . .

The man standing before him is of slight stature and kind of scrappy: his short-sleeved navy garage uniform is untucked and half-open over a thin white A-shirt; a cap sits atop his head, brim bent and slightly cock-eyed. Strands of dark hair poke out artlessly from the sides. But contrasting with everything else about his appearance is a surprisingly delicate jaw and a pair of dark, velvet eyes – he's beautiful. The filthy tow truck guy is beautiful.

“Would you look at that,” he says softly, not quite to himself. He smiles crookedly. “It is you.”

Johnny blinks hard. “Daniel?”

The man's smile transforms instantly into a full grin. He bounces his eyebrows once, emphatic like: *hey, there* or maybe *oh yeah.* No one has ever looked so pleased to be just himself.

Johnny looks him up and down a couple more times, from his heavy work boots to his oil-stained hat. He's so confused. “What are you doing here?”

“You called for me,” says Daniel.

His stomach jumps. “I did?”

“*Well*,” he says, shifting back on his heels; hand rising to fold over a hip, and the move is so familiar Johnny's vision almost swims with disorientation. “To be specific, you called the garage's tow line, and then they paged me, and *I* called *them,* but – yeah, man. Basically, you called me.”

He knocks his hat back by the brim and rubs his wrist idly across his forehead. His grin turns quizzical.

Johnny shifts on the hard curb but doesn't move to stand. His knees are buzzing oddly, and he thinks maybe his legs have fallen asleep. He doesn't want to stumble and be read wrong. He looks at Daniel's hand, the strange slender strength in the crook of his fingers. It really is Daniel LaRusso, jesus.

“Hey, you okay, man?” asks Daniel, voice abruptly sharpening with concern.

“I'm – I'm fine,” he says, and he has to be fine now. He can't let Daniel think he's not fine, it would be so embarrassing.

He goes to tug his suit jacket, thinking to straighten himself up, but he gets lost staring down at the ripped hem of his slacks. Shit. That doesn't look fine.

“Shit,” says Daniel, and he is suddenly crouched in front of him. He reaches out like it's no big deal to touch Johnny, laying careful hands on his right wrist so he can lift it under the street light. The hand looks a little misshapen, knuckles purpling and puffy.

“Okay, I'm no expert, but Johnny – this doesn't look fine.”

“Sorry,” he mutters, and Daniel's eyes jump to his and narrow like he has just said something very strange. They stare at each other.

Daniel clears his throat and sits back, resting an arm on his bent knee. His lashes fall, and he chews his lip. He looks like he's debating with himself, and *good luck, man* thinks Johnny, who wouldn't want to debate Daniel LaRusso in a million years.

“Alright,” he decides at last, standing back up. “It's really late, and I'm sure you want to go home. How about we get the paperwork sorted and I'll hitch her up nice and secure, and then you can get out of here. Okay?”

Johnny doesn't know what else to do except nod. When Daniel turns away to get a clipboard from the truck cab, he carefully stretches his legs out from the curb, flexing his knees in their sockets, trying to wake them up. He is starting to think those last couple beers might have been a mistake. Except when he'd drank them, he hadn't known he'd be seeing Daniel LaRusso.

He takes the clipboard Daniel hands him and tries to fill it out, but when he looks at the tiny boxes his vision won't let them stay still on the page. The lines smear. And the pen is hard to hold in his thick, stiff fingers. Despite these myriad difficulties, he bends over the clipboard until his nose is almost brushing the paper, and he makes do.

Daniel pulls the tow truck in front of the Golf and lowers the bed until it's level with the car. He makes quick work in attaching the necessary chains to the frame of the car and winching it up.

While he's thus distracted, Johnny makes himself stand. He stumbles

slightly back on the sidewalk but corrects; over-corrects and steps wildly off the curb into the street and stumbles again.

“Hey, how we doing over there?” calls Daniel, casting an alert look over his shoulder. The street fills with the groan and grind of the winch pulling the Golf onto the bed of the tow truck.

Johnny raises an arm in acknowledgment. He drops the clipboard.

“Okay, okay,” says Daniel, in front of him again, and ha, look at that, he's still shorter than him. He flicks Johnny a dark, narrow look and takes the clipboard back. He glances down at it, scanning, and his expression turns funny. “Right, well – we can get the rest of the information from you tomorrow morning, I guess.” He tucks the clipboard under his arm and hesitates, looking Johnny over.

Johnny puts his head back and stands very still under his scrutiny, though for some reason this seems to make the whole scene tilt sideways.

“Whoa,” says Daniel, grabbing his arm. He fumbles for his elbow, his bicep, and his grip firms. Johnny kinda wants to fall into it. “Alright, uh – hey, Johnny, you call a cab already?”

“Nope,” he says, popping the end the word like a champagne cork. He feels a little bubbly, like his whole body is fizzing up. So it's appropriate.

Daniel nods. “Okay,” he says again, and he looks a little torn.

Johnny smiles at him. He thinks he might be waiting for something, but he can't remember what that thing is; it doesn't feel like it really matters at the moment. Daniel fucking LaRusso. That's so crazy. He'd forgot him completely.

Daniel's shoulders fall, and then his chin goes back and he says, “Look, it's late and I'm already here – why don't you catch a ride with me. We'll drop the wreck at the garage and then I can drive you home. Sound good?”

And Johnny possesses enough wits to realize he should say something like *thanks but that's not necessary* or *I'm alright, thanks* or even *nah, I'm good, man* but he doesn't say any of these things because what Daniel just said sounds pretty nice, actually. A pillow where he has come to expect a spike, and he doesn't possess the endurance to say no. So he just nods and says simply *okay*.

It's quiet in Daniel's cab.

Chapter 5: A Tale of Two Diners

Chapter Summary

story accompaniment

He is not getting involved. This is what Daniel tells himself as he drives across the valley in the middle of the night.

His stereo is turned low so as to not disturb his passenger. Although – he is pretty sure an exploding nuclear bomb would not stir this guy; Johnny is passed out cold, head against the door, legs sprawled wide. Fucked up hands curled limply in his lap.

Daniel wonders again what the wreck behind them could have done to provoke a bare-knuckle beatdown. But maybe he is blaming the victim here? Maybe Johnny Lawrence grew up to be the kind of guy who got drunk and took out his rage on unsuspecting compact cars. It wouldn't shock Daniel and anyway, it's not his business. He's not getting involved.

When he pulls up to a red light, it is impossible not to shift back in his seat and turn a little to look over at him, eyes tracing his slack profile, cataloging the shape of him and how it differs from the one in his memory. He's filled out a little more, not that he was exactly small before. Grew his hair out again, longer this time. Still wearing the standard Hills uniform. It's hard to tell in its current condition, but the suit doesn't look cheap.

What a mess. This is *just* what Daniel needed dropped in his lap tonight. And yeah, sure, he's thankful it's him and not someone who couldn't handle it – thanks Mr. Aurelius, got it, yeah – but still.

He always figured if he bumped into Johnny again, it'd be different. The other guy would be awake for one. Ideally more sober, two. And Daniel doesn't let his mind wander past that, because you don't go thinking weird things when someone is passed out beside you in a car. It's just not done.

Daniel heaves a heavy, put-upon sigh and wipes his mouth with the back of his wrist. Shakes his head and looks back at the street as the lights go green again.

Back at the garage, he wastes no time getting the car unhooked and

off the truck. He shakes his head again over the illegible, half-completed intake form Johnny had given him and decides against leaving it on Dave's desk. The man will just freak out and lecture him about taking a tow job from an inebriate; he won't understand. Daniel leaves the man a note instead and locks the office up again, returns to the truck.

Inside the cab, he hesitates before putting a hand out and shaking Johnny's shoulder. His head rolls along his neck – great, that's a great sign.

“Johnny,” he says, and he doesn't bother whispering. “Hey, Johnny. Wake up, man. You gotta tell me your address so I can get you home.”

When this elicits no response, he gives up on his gentle shaking and starts poking. Johnny scrunches his face and flinches away from the finger. He mumbles something, but nothing a court of law would recognize.

“*Johnny*.”

“What?” he says, eyes still closed, but twisted up tight along with the rest of his face, like Daniel is some kind of bother, or his mother or something.

“What's your address? I gotta get you home.”

“I don't have a curfew,” says Johnny, sighing. He slouches further down the seat, knees swinging wide.

Daniel sets his teeth. “Well, no, I should hope not. You're like, twenty-seven. Still need your address, man.”

“Can't go home,” he says against the window, stubbornness fogging the glass. “Not gonna.”

God, Daniel really hates dealing with drunks. Part of him always wants to toss them into the Pacific, see if that'll shock them sober so they can be reasonable and coherent again. The fact that he has never done this is truly a testament to his efforts at being a good person.

(Johnny would look good wet, he bets.)

Daniel hangs over the seat a moment longer, waiting and debating with himself. But there's nothing he can do without an address, and he's not about to go digging around the guy's half-comatose body for

his wallet. He might wake up and start swinging.

“Alright,” he says to himself, sinking back behind the wheel. He stares ahead at the open gate of the garage, the dead street on the other side. It's almost three in the morning.

He looks sidelong again at Johnny's hands. His left has fallen onto the seat at his side, and it's in slightly less rough shape than his right, but his knuckles still looked wrecked.

And Daniel is not getting involved. He's just helping.

He drives to a late night diner he knows of near the garage. He parks and hops out and rounds the truck to open the passenger door; Johnny nearly tumbles onto the asphalt. Daniel catches him around his chest, going *whoa, whoa*.

“Where are we?” asks Johnny blearily, squinting at the bright oasis at Daniel's back. He doesn't seem to care he's putting most of his considerable weight on him.

“I'm still on call for a couple hours, figure we'd come here and wait it out,” he says, concealing the effort it takes to hold him up. He makes sure Johnny's stable against the truck before shutting the passenger door. “Gonna get some food in you, maybe you'll wake up and feel a little more cooperative. Tell me where you live.”

Johnny doesn't react to this, but he does straighten up from the truck and tug on the sides of his suit jacket. His tie is a torn and filthy wreck, and it's driving Daniel kind of crazy.

Johnny stills as he reaches for the loosened loop of fabric. His foggy eyes flick down to his hands. Daniel keeps his expression bland.

“Tie's a lost cause,” he explains. “And I'd just as soon not have the waitress thinking you're being held hostage or something.”

Johnny doesn't respond to that either, merely ducks his head obediently to let him take the tie. His throat moves beneath the open collar of his shirt. He smells of beer and blood and asphalt, and he sways forward a little like he'd like to smell of Daniel.

Daniel turns swiftly away, shoving the tie into his pocket. He crosses

the sidewalk to the diner, and holds the door open without looking behind him. He doesn't like what his pulse is doing.

The diner is deserted. It's that dead period of night after most drunks have moved on and before the graveyard shift workers are let out. Daniel thinks the waitress and line cook might be the only other people in the building.

They are seated in a booth along the window overlooking the truck. Daniel asks the waitress to bring a bowl of ice and a towel, if she can, and she can.

Johnny wakes up enough to ask him why he's a tow truck guy.

“I'm not, really,” says Daniel. “Our usual guy broke a leg salsa dancing, so now we're all taking turns.” This reminds him to pull out his pager and set it on the table where he can see it.

"Thought you would've gone to college for sure," he says.

Daniel blinks, a little surprised. "Why?" he asks. But Johnny doesn't respond, just slumps over his unopened plastic menu. “Hey, man. You gonna order anything?”

Johnny tucks his head over his wrist and looks out the window. “Not hungry.”

Daniel narrows his eyes. “Yeah, right. I get it, beer can be pretty filling, especially if you drink it in bulk. Well, tough. You're eating something.” He scans the menu. “How about a burger?”

“*No*,” says Johnny with sudden vehemence. “Not a burger.”

Daniel clicks his tongue. “Not a burger. Right, noted.”

The waitress brings a paper cup full of ice and the towel and Daniel exchanges the supplies for their order: two plates of breakfast special, nothing fancy.

After she's left again, Daniel takes his cap off and tosses it to the side on the booth seat. He rakes his limp hat hair back from his forehead and sighs. He sits forward, beckoning at the drunk fool opposite.

“Alright, let's see your hand,” he says, and he deliberately doesn't look up when Johnny obligingly slides his arm across the table. He's not thinking about this right now. He's not involved.

There is always a certain loneliness in dealing with drunks, he's found. They're not all there, even as their actions and words definitely are – and can linger far into the future, in fact. Johnny Lawrence is in front of him, but not really. Not in any meaningful way. He could be anyone, and the only important part is that he happens be someone who needs help.

His right hand looks a lot worse under the bright lights of the diner. It's puffed up like someone tried to make a sad party balloon and hot to the touch. Daniel winces a little and reaches for the ice, pours it in the towel and sets the improvised cold pack carefully over the man's hand. When Johnny flinches, he brushes the pads of his fingers over the pulse of his wrist in unthinking comfort.

“Don't think there's anyway to tell what damage you've done until the swelling goes down,” he says, regretful, and he lifts his eyes without thinking.

Johnny gazes unblinking back. He doesn't look like he gives a fuck about his hand, which – well, if he did, he probably wouldn't be in the shape he's in, would he.

“Why are you here?” he asks, voice deceptively lucid; the way drunks can sound sometimes when they're calm and slow.

Daniel smiles slightly. “Think we should save the existential inquiry for when you're sobered up, huh?”

Johnny's eyes shift down to where Daniel is holding the ice pack against his hand. He blinks a couple times before turning to look around the empty diner. Daniel watches his face, the shifting line of his jaw.

“I like diners,” says Johnny.

“Sure, what's not to like,” says Daniel, easy.

"Do you remember," Johnny begins, and he cuts him off with a *yes*, because he does. One of the strangest mornings of his life, and he still couldn't explain why. It's not something he'll probably ever understand.

Johnny does a lot of nodding. “You can be anyone in a diner,” he announces.

Daniel lifts the pack slightly to check on the skin of his hand. He asks,

mild, “And who do you wanna be?”

But Johnny doesn't seem to hear the question, or maybe he chooses not to answer. He just keeps staring dully at the stretch of unoccupied seats.

“I can't go home,” he says again.

And Daniel is absolutely not getting involved.

“That's okay,” he says. “You don't have to.”

Chapter 6: Plan is, No Plan

He wakes up five times before he wakes up for good, and he never registers much more than pain: acute from the pressure of his bladder; dull and pervading throughout the rest of his body; stiffly uncooperative in his right hand. And like most mornings, he asks himself: why? But this changes the last time, when he wakes up and stays awake.

He can feel something outside himself. He remembers he is not in his own bed. The sheets feel cheaper than he is used to, the mattress beneath him is a shade too stiff, and both smell *good*.

He shifts onto his front and crooks a knee up, rolling and resetting his hips. He burrows beneath the pillow and sheets, breathing deep. He still hurts all over. But it doesn't matter.

He thinks about the night before, what he remembers. The bar, the woman, the car, torn condom, knife!, the car, the car, the car, the car, Daniel.

Daniel.

Daniel.

He's at Daniel's place. He's in Daniel's bed. *I'll take the couch; Oh, don't be difficult now. You're too big for the couch. You'll roll off in the middle of the night and try to catch yourself with those fucked up hands and just make everything worse. Just – take the damn bed; Okay.*

Daniel put him in his bed. And he didn't stick around, but still. He put Johnny in his bed.

He raises his head, tossing the pillow to the side. He sniffs and grunts and looks around the small bedroom, absorbing all the details he hadn't been able to in the drunk dark the night before.

The walls are a pale peach dotted with tiny green and pink flowers, the kind of wallpaper someone's grandmother would pick out, or so Johnny assumes. The room is very neat: a bed with no headboard and a simple wooden chest of drawers, a small shelf of books on the far wall and a desk in front of the window, all made from the same pale wood.

He tries to imagine Daniel sitting there, bent over a book or some paperwork or something and raising his head to look out the window. It's surprisingly easy. He likes the image. It feels quiet, but not silent.

Johnny decides to play this cool.

He shuffles out of the bedroom, rubbing his left shoulder and grimacing, remembering landing on it when he fell off the car the night before. He looks down a short hallway to a living room. Opposite the room he just came from is a door, closed; a few feet down is another, open – tile on the floor. Bathroom.

He slips inside and shuts the door. Pisses long and good while raising himself up on his tiptoes and craning his head curiously to look out the window above the toilet. He has no idea what neighborhood this is. He doesn't remember the drive at all, must've been asleep.

The sink is mostly clean, but has some stray shaving hairs around the drain. He runs his finger through them and looks at the counter, weirdly fascinated by every detail: the brand of shaving cream, the slender, flaking bar of handsoap, the splayed bristles of the toothbrushes in the paste-splotched cup.

He looks in the mirror and immediately wishes he hadn't. He is still wearing his slacks and shirt from the day before, and the reminder brings him out of the moment, the room, the house.

He turns away and starts the shower. He strips out of the clothes, kicking them into a crumpled pile in the corner before stepping into the tub. The water pressure is kind of shit and the shower head occasionally fizzles and spits, but it still feels good to duck his head under the stream and shut his eyes for a while.

There is a bewildering number of products on the shower shelf. Some of them look like they are meant for girls, which makes Johnny wonder. Maybe Daniel has a girlfriend? Maybe he has a live-in girlfriend? Maybe Johnny wasn't even in his bed, maybe he was in a guest bed and he got all worked up over nothing. That's so embarrassing. He has to play it cool. Not like he asked to be in the man's bed. In fact, he was fine with the couch. He'd still take the couch too, if that's what Daniel prefers.

Though if Daniel has a guest bed, why would he want Johnny taking

up space on his couch? Think, man.

He mutinously grabs the non-girly shampoo and uncaps it. He gives it a cautious sniff; shrugs and suds his head up, obliterating the lingering tack of his workweek styling cream from the previous morning. His right hand aches with the motion, and he spends the next minute squinting through the sting of shampoo at his knuckles, carefully bending and prodding them. The bruising is pretty bad, but nothing feels cracked or broken, he doesn't think.

He finishes rinsing his hair and washing his body using mostly his left hand, and he thinks about jerking off but something holds him back. He doesn't know what to expect out there.

He drips water all over the floor as he crosses back to the closet by the door and roots around for a towel that will fit around his hips. He secures it with a knot and goes back out into the hallway.

The living room is carpeted in a tan shag, its walls paneled with dark wood. The television sitting in the corner is too small, like Daniel deliberately downsized it to make more room for his books, and he has a lot of them: his bookshelf looks like it might collapse beneath the weight of them all; a few have escaped and started reproducing in piles on the floor.

The couch Johnny was prepared to give himself to the night before is threadbare yellow and orange velvet, clearly from the 70s at the latest. The armchair sitting beside the floor lamp looks a little more comfortable, and he wonders if he could sleep sitting. Bums on the street make it look easy.

He wanders past it all and takes a right into the kitchen, and Daniel looks up from his newspaper.

He is dressed in a simple T-shirt and jeans, his dark hair combed softly back from his forehead but refusing to stay there. Despite the tight grip he has on his mug, he looks relaxed, like he belongs in this house and knows it. He'd always looked like he belonged wherever he was, even when everyone else at school including Johnny thought otherwise. He carried his own world with him.

“Thought I heard the shower,” he says, and he looks Johnny over.

It doesn't seem like something that requires a response, so Johnny doesn't give one. He walks past the table towards the fridge, and Daniel turns in his seat to follow his progress.

He should have toweled his hair dry or something, he thinks. Daniel doesn't seem to have air conditioning, but the wet on his shoulders still feels kind of cold.

“How are you feeling?” asks Daniel.

“Fine,” says Johnny. He pauses, one hand on the fridge. He adds, “Thanks,” and pulls the door open.

Under a rush of cold air that tightens his nipples and makes his skin come over with gooseflesh, he scans the contents of the fridge. He selects the carton of whole milk – what kind of weirdo buys whole milk? Johnny shouldn't complain. Johnny isn't going to complain. Johnny opens the carton and takes a drink, and it's fine. He is glad he didn't complain.

Some instinct makes him turn a little and cast an eye back at Daniel. He lowers the carton. “What?”

Daniel's jaw ticks to the side. He shakes his head and says, “Nothing, I guess. How's your hand?”

Johnny glances down at it again. The bruising is likely visible from across the room. He shrugs. “Just bruising, pretty sure. Nothing I haven't done before.”

Daniel doesn't look like he likes this answer, and it's only a little weird Johnny can tell. He always could tell back then too. He forgot that. He'd forget, and then they'd be alone, and it would be just like this.

“You uh,” and Daniel puts his eyes someplace else, freeing Johnny to take another swig of milk before replacing the carton and shutting the fridge. “You want to tell me what happened last night?”

Johnny thinks about it: the answer here is very clearly *no*. Except he doesn't think Daniel will like that answer; he wouldn't get it. He'd think Johnny is hiding something, but Johnny isn't hiding anything. What happened last night is no longer relevant to his situation, is all. Maybe he should lie.

“I don't remember last night,” he says.

Daniel narrows his eyes. “You don't remember.” Johnny shakes his head. “What, nothing? The bar, the car? Me towing the car?” Johnny shakes his head. “The diner? You agreeing to come back here?” Johnny shakes his head. “You blowing me in the living room?”

“*I did not,*” he says instantly.

For a second of panic, he wonders if he possibly could have and forgotten, but then Daniel lifts the mug at his elbow and takes a leisurely sip. Johnny flattens his mouth.

“You could just say it's none of my business and you don't want to talk about it,” Daniel tells him earnestly. “I'm not your father, man. I can't make you.”

Daniel grimaces as soon as the words are out of his mouth. Johnny feels his face heat. Their eyes crawl away from the other like wrong magnets.

Johnny looks around the kitchen instead. Unlike the bedroom or even the living room, the kitchen is really cluttered. There isn't a single free spot of wall space on the entire length of the counter. Bottles of various liquids, canisters of spice. Far more spoons than any one man could possibly need.

“You do a lot of cooking?” he asks.

Daniel says with forced casualness, “Yeah... yeah, I do. You?”

“No.”

Johnny doesn't know what else to say, and Daniel might but he chooses not to. Johnny shifts in place, his bare soles peeling loudly from the linoleum.

“So, uh – I don't know your schedule, but I have to get to work in a couple hours,” says Daniel eventually. “I was wondering, if you,” and he trails off.

When Johnny sneaks a look back at him, he is frowning down at his newspaper, finger tapping along the edge of his mug. Even something about the way he sits at the table looks comfortable and right. Johnny wonders what he'd do if he went over there right now and folded down beside his chair, put his hands on his thighs and waited just like that.

Except he is playing it cool, so he's not going to do that. Daniel hasn't actually indicated he wants Johnny to do something like that, asshole comment about blowjobs in the living room notwithstanding. Also they don't know each other at all. There is that.

“Okay,” says Johnny.

Daniel stir and peers at him like he's one of those Magic Eye pictures, and he can't make out the image of a man. “Okay?” he repeats, dubious.

Johnny shrugs. “Yeah, okay.” He pauses and thinks about it. “I'm going back to sleep.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “You're – oh. Uh, but what about—”

“Yeah.” Johnny nods and starts out of the room.

“Okay?” says Daniel to his back. He sounds lost, but it's fine because he's not lost, he's in his kitchen. He's in his kitchen and soon he will be at work, and Johnny will be back here in his bed. He's pretty certain it's his bed now, and not a guest bed. It smells like him.

Chapter 7: Might As Well Jump

Johnny actually means to sit and wait, but the combined power of his hangover and Daniel's shitty mattress overpower him; he falls asleep again.

He wakes to a light knock on the open bedroom door. He stirs. Daniel is standing in the doorway and he pushes up onto his elbows, expectant. The room is a little darker than earlier; the window must face east, he thinks.

Daniel kicks a leg along the floor. His gaze travels around the room like he's trying to look anywhere but at the bed, and Johnny remembers he hadn't pulled a sheet over himself before passing out again. He makes no move to do so now – too obvious, and anyway, this is honest, isn't it? He thinks he always tried to be honest with Daniel.

“So. I'm heading into work,” says Daniel. “Can I drop you home?”

Johnny doesn't tense, because tensing meant moving. “You said I didn't have to.”

His eyes widen. “I ah—” and Daniel cuts himself off with a slight laugh. He runs his thumbnail along his brow. “Uh, yeah. Guess I did, huh. Okay, but – look, Johnny, is there something wrong back at home? I mean, are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No,” says Johnny, nonplussed. “I just don't want to go back there.”

He doesn't know how to explain it. If a guy pulls another guy out of some quicksand, he doesn't usually turn around and ask if he wants to hop back in – it just doesn't make sense.

Daniel folds his arms, tucking his hands out of sight. He still looks confused, but not like he's about to kick Johnny out of the house. “Okay,” he says.

“Okay,” agrees Johnny, a little relieved.

Daniel rocks back a step; hesitates, still looking uncertain. He looks down his hallway and back at Johnny, lying naked on his bed.

“I guess – I'll see you later, then?” he says, every word filled with a different question.

“Yeah,” says Johnny.

After Daniel leaves, he gets up and explores the apartment some more. It's only about half the size of the place Johnny's not going back to but crammed full with way more stuff. Poor people always have so much stuff, he reflects with some bemusement, tripping his fingers along the dusty edge of the bookshelf in the living room.

He picks up a small wooden toy from the top shelf: a tiny drum with two beaded ropes hanging from it. Some kind of really lame rattle? It looks really old. Did Daniel play with this as a baby? Poor people never throw anything out. Surely he's gotta know they probably make way better rattles these days.

He turns away and spots a boom box over along the other wall next to the armchair. Finally.

He crouches down and investigates the pile of tapes. No, no, definitely not, Sonny and Cher?, no, maybe, don't know it, don't know it, no, and alright now we're talking—

He pops the case open; slides the tape out onto his hand; flips it around and slots it neatly into the stereo; pushes the deck closed; hits the play button and motherfucker hasn't rewound the damn tape. Some people shouldn't be allowed to listen to music. He shakes his head and punches the rewind button.

He shifts in his squat, looking around the room again as he waits. He kind of likes this dump, he decides.

These walls have never heard an hour-long conversation consisting of one man begging a fiber glass executive to stay with his firm. No one who has ever lived here probably knows anything about balanced scorecards and project timelines and focus groups about whether a cold cream makes a woman feel more empowered to balance a career and family.

The tape clicks off, rewind complete. He hits the play button and stands. The synth line of 1984 bleeds out into the room.

He goes to find something to eat. He's starving.

He bobs his head to David Lee Roth getting up as he investigates the

fridge again. He takes out a packet of pastrami cold cuts and a block of cheese, some mustard and mayo. He finds half a loaf of bread sitting on the counter, but it's not sliced. He swivels around the kitchen, looking for something to cut it with, and the turn happens to coincide with Jump's first chorus, well—

Might as well jump.

After he's eaten, he tries watching TV for a while, but a few minutes of flipping through Daniel's whopping six channels makes him give up. He doesn't actually want to watch daytime television, anyway. It makes him feel like he's playing hooky, like he should actually be in the office, and this makes him hurriedly switch off the box. He has better things to occupy his time, surely.

He sits back on his wrists on the floor in front of the television, and then flinches forward again as his hands protest the pressure of his weight. He looks at the darkness of his knuckles and flexes his hand, testing. He thinks.

He pushes the sofa back a couple feet to clear a proper space in the room, and he goes through all his old stretches. Some of them are fine – the ones he still uses before going on a run. But others are disturbing: his hip flexors are far too tight. All that sitting at a desk.

He does a kip up, and of course he can still do it but something in his back tells him he only has a few of those in the tank for the day, and jesus, when did that happen? How high can he get his leg? When's the last time he tried – okay, that's still pretty high. But still. For how long?

John Lawrence never needed to kick anything. Except a railroad crossing arm that one time when he was late to a meeting and an Amtrak cut him off, but that was like six months ago.

Unacceptable.

He's in the middle of moving through all his forms when something jangles on the other side of the door. He ignores it, thinking it's just Daniel coming home. But then the door swings open and a woman

steps inside and jumps as he lands his roundhouse, and then she's screaming *back off, you bastard, I know karate* and he looks her over with vague hope before concluding with some annoyance, *no, you don't.* Because he knows her, actually.

“Johnny Lawrence?” says Susan, disbelieving. And then quickly, “Oh my god, why are you naked?”

He glances down. “I don't have any clothes.”

“What does that mean,” she cries hysterically. “Why wouldn't you have any clothes? Like, what, did he *take* them? Ohmygod, that manwhore – don't answer. I don't want to know.”

Johnny turns over *manwhore* in his head. He squints. “You mean Daniel?”

Susan puts a hand up and lifts her eyes to the ceiling dramatically. “I'm not talking to you until you've covered *that* up.”

And *that* doesn't really appreciate her tone. He folds his arms in a show of solidarity. “Fine. I don't want to talk to you anyway.”

“I will call the cops,” she threatens.

“Go ahead,” he says, but then she actually stalks towards the phone on the wall in the kitchen and he breaks immediately. “Okay! Jesus, okay – look, I'll grab something. Jesus christ.”

“Even he had some modesty on the cross,” she shouts at his back as he heads down the hallway.

In the bathroom he fishes his boxers out from the corpse of his work clothes and puts them on. He tries going back into the other room, but Susan looks at his chest and wordlessly lifts a hand, spinning her index finger in the air and shaking her head. Jesus.

He goes back to Daniel's bedroom and hesitates in front of the chest of drawers. He hadn't investigated this earlier – looking through a person's clothes feels a lot more personal than their cassette tapes.

He shakes the unease that he's doing something wrong off and jerks open the first drawer. Underwear, not thinking about it. Second drawer, socks. Third drawer, undershirts – too small for him. Fourth drawer—

“You know,” says Susan in the other room, once he has emerged with his chest and dick safely shielded from her blistering contempt, “you two are a little late for the whole ill-advised hook-up with an old classmate thing – our reunion was like a month ago.”

His hands falter over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. *Manwhore* and *hook-up* reverberate around his skull. She thinks he had sex with Daniel. She thinks Daniel would have sex with him. She knows Daniel is queer. She thinks Johnny is a queer. They've known each other since middle school; she used to give out the worst Valentines to the class; didn't matter what she wrote, it never sounded sincere. But she sounded sincere just now, when she said the thing about hook-ups. Because she thinks Johnny and Daniel have had sex. Like, recently. And possibly before.

He stares at her, and she stares back. Seconds pass. Her eyes narrow. His do not. Her mouth twists. His does not. She makes an angry scoffing sound and stands back with a hand on her hip. He doesn't move.

“Do you have *brain damage* or something?” she explodes at last.

“This isn't a hook-up,” he says, and he drags the chair out to sit down. He puts his arms on the table and tries to relax, so this feels less like a performance review at the conference table in the office. “I'm staying here.” Because Daniel hadn't said otherwise, so. It's basically true.

Except Susan says, “You're not staying here. *I*'m staying here. There's only one spare bed and I was here first.”

“Why are you here, anyway?” he asks, because the place is beneath her usual standards. She looks kind of weird, too, now that he's really looking; her hair and clothing are very put-together, not a thread or lock out of place, but her eyes are red, the skin around them smudged grey with mascara.

“None of your business,” she says, and fine. None of his business. He shrugs and looks down at the table. She lasts less than five seconds. “Look, I'm going through a bad break-up, and I can't go home because my parents are getting a divorce and it's basically like Waco over there. Any day now I expect to see on the news the place has burned to the ground.”

He only nods; from what he remembers, her parents had always been like that. He's just surprised it took so long. Then again, his own mom is still married to Sid. So clearly it can take longer.

“What the hell,” she says, and she yanks the chair opposite him out and slumps down in it, staring at him with delicate pink-powdered shock. “Johnny Lawrence. What have you been doing for the past ten years?”

Johnny hesitates.

Chapter 8: And Everything Makes Sense Again

Chapter Summary

story accompaniment

“Last I heard, you were working with Tommy at his dad's company,” says Susan.

He shifts in the chair, tries to hit back. “And last I heard, you went to college and got weird.”

“Uh, I went to college and met *normal people.* I got out,” she says, impassioned like she is the greatest underdog since Rocky Balboa. “I flew free of our group's insane valley karate drama and I never looked back.”

“Yeah, that's why you're in the valley right now, because you never looked back.” He pauses and checks, “We are in the valley right now, right?”

She gives him a pitying look. “I'm not even going to answer that. God, how did you even get here?”

This, he feels comfortable answering. “Car broke down, Daniel gave me a tow.”

“Oh, how accommodating of him,” she says, bitchily pleasant. “Towed you right back here, did he?” But when Johnny just shrugs, she sits back in her chair, defeated. “Talking to you is like trying to get answers from an underwear ad in a magazine,” she mutters.

“I mean, that's what ads are supposed to do,” he says, unthinking. “Give people an answer. Even if they don't know the question.”

She squints at him. He screws his mouth unhappily to the side and looks away, around the kitchen. Time passes.

“So! Last I heard,” she says brightly, nodding her head from side to side, “you were working with Tommy at his dad's company.”

“Jesus,” he groans, pitching forward to put his head on the table. It's easier to mutter the rest into the wood, not looking at her: “Alright, yeah. I did. For a couple years. Then a guy there got a job at a different company. When he moved, I went along. I quit yesterday.”

“Wait, really?” she asks, and something about the sharpness of her tone has him rotating his face a couple inches to peer at her. She continues, “That's it? You've just been working in some office this whole time?”

His stomach tightens in an echo of anxiety. *Johnny, man, you're going to be the next Benny Urquidez!* says Dutch in his head years and years ago. *Better start working on that nickname. Sucks The Jet is already taken, that's got a good ring to it: Johnny the Jet.*

“Yeah, basically,” he says, empty.

“But that's so normal,” she says, and she sounds kind of devastated about it.

She stands up so abruptly, he starts a little. She walks to the center of the kitchen and turns around slowly, face doing something weird and off-putting. She throws a hand out to grasp the sink and stares out the window. He watches her, confused.

“Is this really what life is?” she asks, voice thick with emotion. “Even the closeted problem child ends up doing the 9-to-5? Is life really so small? So constrained and mundane? All of our greatest torments and most deep-seated longing confined to play out in the rigid window between rush hour and the evening news?”

Johnny has no clue what she is talking about, but he thinks about *closeted problem child* and realizes she is probably referring to him.

“Hey,” he says.

She spins and looks at him like this is all his fault. “How could you?” she demands.

“You're a fucking nutcase, you know that?” he asks, a little shaken. “I mean, jesus. Is this what Daniel's been doing this whole time, hanging out with crazy people?”

She lunges for the counter and plants her elbows, resting her chin in her palms. Her eyes gleam. “So you two haven't actually talked?”

He ignores the question. “And anyway, I'm not doing the 9-to-5. Not anymore. I told you, I quit.”

She waves this away with a flutter of fingers. “You'll get another,” she says, dismissive.

“No,” he says, because that hadn't actually occurred to him, but now it's occurring to him and he hates it. “No, I won't. I'm not going to.”

“Uh, yes, you will?” she says, puzzled. “That's how this works. You lose a job—”

“I quit,” he says quickly.

“—and you look for another. The space in between is like. Static.”

“Well, not me,” he says. “That's not how I work.”

He can't go back; he won't. He tries to grasp at how he'd felt just a couple hours before, when Van Halen was blasting and the day had felt open and free. He'd felt *in* his body, like it was his again. He can't just turn away from that, he won't—

Except he already did once, didn't he? So why wouldn't he again?

“So,” she says, dragging the word out. “What's your plan, then? I swear Tommy told me you'd been cut off, so you can't like, *not* work —”

“I'm going to fight,” he says, and like setting a dislocated shoulder back into its socket, he instantly feels better: he feels right. “I have a line on something, and – yeah. I'm going to fight.”

She considers this response for a while.

“So the valley karate drama wins out in the end,” she says, but she is less sneering about it this time; in fact, she sounds almost satisfied, like the world finally sounds familiar again.

“Guess so,” he says.

Chapter 9: ...

"*You're loyal to a company for eight years, and what do you get? A one-line resume.*"

They end up in the living room in front of the TV, because it's less awkward to be in a room with someone you don't really know if you're both watching something. As the evening outside ages and shades over into gold and purple, the room darkens around them. And then it's much less awkward to be in a room together, because the only light is coming from the screen, and it's like neither of them are really even there.

"Hey, settle a bet I had with myself?" says Susan, turning into the corner of the sofa and looking at him expectantly. Warily, he says, *sure*. "Prom night. Did you and Daniel hook up?"

Johnny doesn't look away from Jamie and Paul, the black and white montage of their cozy-perfect life together. "No."

He barely remembers Prom. It's not something he has ever spent much time thinking about.

"Really? Are you sure?" And when he slides her a confused look, she says, "Hey, Tommy was wasted by the end of that night."

"*You know what I'm going to do today?" says Jamie on the TV. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing.*"

"Well, not me," says Johnny. "I was in training mode that spring. If Sensei even thought he smelled a beer on me, he'd have me doing burpees until I threw up." He pauses, uncomfortable. He isn't used to talking about being gay aloud, like it's normal. But she doesn't seem to think it *isn't* normal, so— "Why do you ask?"

"Mm?" she stirs and glances over, so casual. Tucks her legs up beneath her on the sofa and drapes herself over the armrest; flicks a hand dismissively – even more casual. "Oh, I don't know. I always thought something must've went down.... Daniel was really moody the whole night. At first I thought it was because Ali's football player, but he seemed okay with that, actually."

"Anyone never tell you to mind your own business?" he asks, but he's thinking about Daniel standing empty-handed outside the school, his

dark eyes. He doesn't really remember what they talked about. Just the way Daniel had looked at him.

“Not that I ever heard,” she says. “But my hearing's selective like that.”

Her tone is a little weird, like he's hit a sore spot. He shifts uncomfortably. He's not going to ask. He wouldn't want to talk about it, so he's doing her a favor, probably.

“*It's 8:45 and my day already sucks.”*

“*My god, did I look like that while I was working?”*

Johnny squints blindly at the TV, trying to remember. Daniel had wanted to know if he was alright, and he'd told him about training, probably. Was that enough to put Daniel in a bad mood? He was always pretty weird about fighting.

Jamie kisses Paul by the door and his arms come up around her tightly like he knows she's all his and he's comfortable and confident with the knowledge, and he lifts and swings her neatly out of the way so he can leave for work, and Daniel arrives home.

Johnny and Susan turn and look over the back of the sofa, and he pauses in the doorway, eyebrows floating up. He slowly shuts the door and shoves his keys into the pocket of his work pants.

“And how are you two doing this evening,” he asks, crossing the small space into the kitchen. He sits heavily in the nearest chair and ducks his head to pull at his boot laces. His hair tumbles forward, concealing his expression. “You having a good time running up my electric bill?”

“Hey, I offered to pay half,” says Susan. “But you realized you wouldn't get to complain and told me *no, no, don't worry about it*.”

Daniel hauls his boots off and sets them aside under the table. He plants his hands on his thighs and sends her an amazed look. “I didn't say *don't worry about it*, I said *how long are you planning on staying?*”

“Why are you home early, anyway?” she asks. “I thought you were on tow duty again tonight.”

Daniel's eyes shift over to Johnny for a second before he stands and walks around the counter out of sight. “I traded nights with Joe,” he calls.

Susan widens her eyes at Johnny. “Wonder why.”

They get off the sofa and gravitate into the other room, where Daniel is washing his hands in the sink. Johnny leans along the other side of the counter and watches the movement of his forearms, the grey of the soapy water sluicing over his oil-stained fingers. When he looks up, Daniel is watching his dark reflection in the window.

“You two eat?” asks Daniel evenly.

“No,” sighs Susan. “I thought about making something, but the last time I tried you lectured me for twenty minutes about using the wrong utensil on your precious pan.”

Daniel turns around and leans against the sink, briskly toweling his hands dry. He keeps his eyes on Susan as he says, “You know, there's a theory in psychology called *learned helplessness*, and I don't actually know it, but I have this tiny inkling it might apply here.”

“So you're saying we should order takeout again,” says Susan.

“I could go for pizza,” says Johnny, and he tries not to notice how Daniel's eyes jump to him instantly.

“I think there's still some chicken breast,” says Daniel after a second. He tosses the dish towel through the rung of his oven door and turns towards the fridge. “Chicken Parmesan sound good?”

So they settle around the kitchen table as Daniel moves around his kitchen, taking out chicken, some eggs, flour, and breadcrumbs, and a glass container of tomato sauce.

Johnny's never been very interested in cooking, always flips past cooking shows without pause. But there is something weirdly interesting about watching Daniel work. On the cooking shows it's always someone standing around with bowls of shit, most of the prep work done off camera; with Daniel, Johnny gets to watch every small step: the careful brace of his strong fingers as he cuts the pink chicken breast into smooth fillets, the brisk swivel of his wrist as he whisks the egg, the deft dredging of the chicken through flour and breadcrumb. The way he knows when to turn and check the pasta boiling on the stove top. His movements are assured and economical.

“So, please tell me you guys didn't sit here in silence until I got home,” says Daniel. He glances up from his preparations. “Well? What about it? Suze, you get anything useful out of this guy?”

Susan straightens up in her chair and folds her hands together atop the table, starts talking like a news anchor. “Well, after his karate career imploded and his parents cut him off for reasons-unknown-but-we-can-guess, Johnny Lawrence moved from office job to office job until this, too, spectacularly blew up in his face. He's gay, single, taciturn, and kind of needy.”

“Bitch,” says Johnny, shocked. He doesn't remember telling her half of that.

“So in other words, just your type,” she says, switching her gleaming malevolence to Daniel, who only smiles sarcastically back. It's disorienting as fuck, watching two people act so conversational and casual about it.

“You should count yourself lucky I respect the food too much to poison you,” says Daniel, before turning with the pasta pot in hand to drain the water. A cloud of steam rises over the sink. “Don't mind her, Johnny,” he says over his shoulder. “She's an assistant for some bigshot agent. Between her job and her personality, she really never stood a chance.”

“You said you were going to be nice to me,” she says.

“I said I'd be nice if you were nice,” says Daniel mildly, turning back to the counter. He watches her get up from the table and walk from the room. He calls after her, “I'll let you know when dinner's ready.”

“Not hungry!” she responds, already down the hallway. She slams the door to the guest bedroom.

Johnny watches Daniel's expression flatten in impatient regret. After a second, his eyes flicker to Johnny.

“She's going through a rough patch,” he explains, even though Johnny hadn't asked. “Her girlfriend dumped her, and I gather she wasn't ah, kind about it."

But she seems too girly to be a dyke, Johnny thinks but does not say; he doesn't really know what to make of it all, this strange little household Daniel is running.

“Okay, so – your turn, Johnny,” says Daniel.

Johnny blinks and looks at him again, but the other man is preoccupied with draping his breaded chicken over a pan full of hot

oil and does not look up. A light sizzling fills the room.

“My turn, what?” he asks.

“To share. Last night you weren't really in any condition to talk, but you seem more or less recovered,” and his eyes do come up then, but only to look at Johnny's hands. He continues, “So, tell me what you're thinking. You're in my house, you're in my clothes – I'm somehow suddenly cooking you dinner.”

“Yeah, thanks,” says Johnny, because that feels like the polite thing to say. For some reason, this makes Daniel shake his head.

He finishes laying out his chicken and turns to wash his hands again. Then he rounds the counter and steps up in front of Johnny, who does not stand or move in any way. He lets it happen, whatever it's to be.

He looks again at the slender, tanned arms emerging from the rough work shirt, the dip of smooth skin at his open collar.

“You and me were never so great at communicating back in the day,” says Daniel.

“We weren't?” he says, distracted. He remembers it like the opposite. They were great at communicating, if and when Daniel let them be. And it feels the same now. It feels like an answer: an answer to a question he hadn't known how to ask.

Daniel shakes his head slightly and wets his bottom lip. His eyes search Johnny's and he says clearly, “What do you want here, Johnny?”

Chapter 10: A View of a Room

He sits messy-haired in Daniel's house in nothing but his boxers, stretching out Daniel's red Jersey Devils shirt at the shoulders and biceps, and he has the gall to look surprised at Daniel's question.

Johnny's mouth opens but he stalls out. His eyes shift away, gaze going someplace in his head.

“Hey,” says Daniel, tone meant to tug his attention back, and it does – too readily; he has to stop himself from following it up by moving closer and touching him.

The problem is, Johnny doesn't hold himself like someone sitting in front of a near-stranger, and it's kind of concerning but also terribly appealing.

Daniel has always defaulted to certain light over-familiarity in his flirting; *I'm friendly* and *trust me?* and if someone responds to it, he does his best to live up to the initial promise. But Johnny's body language blasts past all that. His knees look ready to swing wide to let Daniel in close, and his shoulders are relaxed and receptive, like they'd love nothing more than to provide a landing pad for Daniel's hands. If Daniel didn't happen to already know his name, he wonders if Johnny would even offer it before offering himself.

Johnny watches him, blue eyes wary for all the wrong reasons.

“It's a question, not a rejection,” says Daniel, not ungentle. “Why did you stick around this morning?”

Johnny says simply, “I don't know.”

He slowly folds forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. This leaves Daniel to look at the back of his bowed head, the silky fall of his hair and his exposed neck. C'mon, man, he thinks a little weakly. Are you for real?

“You said you weren't in trouble,” says Daniel, trying to prompt him but also double-checking.

He shakes his head. “Not like – nothing like you mean.”

“People generally don't go one-man wrecking crew on their own car if things are going fine.”

“I didn't say things were fine,” says Johnny, sending him an annoyed look up through his lashes, and the sight of it is more reassuring than Daniel is prepared to admit.

“Then what?” He has to make himself be patient as Johnny struggles to answer.

“My job,” he says eventually, halting. He shifts uneasily on the chair. “I don't know. My whole life – it's not real. None of it matters. It's fake. But it's all there was, that I could see, and it was just. It was so – *loud*—”

Daniel relents a moment and cups the back of his head, fingers sliding through his hair. It's as soft as it looks. Johnny's shoulders loosen instantly with relief, and Daniel rubs his thumb along the soft skin behind his ear as a reward to one or maybe both of them.

“I don't know if this is where I'm supposed to be,” says Johnny, eyes somewhere around Daniel's navel. “But it feels like it is?”

And what's Daniel supposed to say to that? *No*? *Get out*?

He couldn't help Johnny back in school – if Johnny even wanted his help, and Daniel has gone over it in his head probably a thousand times since, wondering. Fact was, Johnny only ever came to him for one thing back then. But they can do better this time. Daniel can do better.

“The good news here,” he says, steady like he knows what he's doing, “is that you're too young for a mid-life crisis – you got time to turn things around, Johnny. Whatever that looks like.”

He shakes his head slightly, careful not to dislodge Daniel's hand. “I know,” he says dully. “That's the worst part – all this time, and I don't know what to do with it.”

“Well, I can't speak for the rest of your life, but for tonight you can sit there and eat dinner – if I don't burn it, *fuck*,” he says in a sharp jolt of realization, and he rushes away to rescue the chicken on the stove.

“Wait, so he's *staying*?” demands Susan as they do the dishes after dinner. She hisses it in a whisper, so Johnny won't hear them over the TV in the other room. “Are you kidding me? For how long?”

“What's the point of having a house if you can't have people stay over from time to time?” he reasons without answering. He rinses a plate and sets it in the dish rack to be ignored by his supposed helper.

“So guy walks back into your life after a decade and you just drop everything to help him?" *What the hell am I dropping?* he asks; he is ignored. "Just like that? You do remember he used to push you around back in school, right?”

And what's he supposed to say to that? *He also used to get down on his knees and pay fealty to my dick like he could die happy so long as it was in him.*

“I don't know why you're making this out to be bigger than it is,” he says, plunging his hands back into the soapy water with prejudice. He asks sidelong, “You see me making him a spare key? Am I adding him to my checking account? I'm letting the guy crash here for a while, big deal.”

“You know what this is, right?” she asks, and he wonders if she's seriously going to spend another five minutes drying that same glass. “You like it when other people are a mess. It makes you feel better about yourself.”

He grits his teeth. “Gotta say, Suze, that's a pretty uncharitable way to look at someone who is just trying to help a friend.”

She makes a noise. “You and Johnny have never been friends.”

“I was talking about you, actually,” he says pointedly.

She finally sets the bone-dry glass down on the counter, but only so she can face off against him, hand on her hip. “You want me to leave?”

He doesn't shut his eyes, but it's a near thing. He loves his friends, he does. He is grateful for every presence in his life. “That's not what I said.”

“So I'm not *grateful* enough, is that it?”

“Oh my god, who asked for gratitude?” he asks in a fraught whisper-shout. “I'd settle for you not insulting me!”

She flips the dish towel over her shoulder and leans back against the counter by the sink, studiously inspecting her nails. Abruptly calm in

one of her dizzying turns of emotion. “I wasn't insulting you, Daniel. I was trying to help by pointing out a certain pattern of behavior, a devastating character flaw in your makeup – your Achilles's Heel, you could say. I could mention notable past relationships that fit this pattern – Nicole, for example.”

“Okay, yeah, Nicole had some problems. But who doesn't? And you know, her dad was—”

“Then there was Jack....”

“He's doing really good these days, actually. And I'm not trying to take credit, I know things ended kind of messy with us, but I *do* think—”

“And of course, let's not forget Chozen—”

His eyes shoot wide and he almost glances over his shoulder, like the mention of the man might call him forth into the house. “Whoa, whoa – Chozen and I never dated. That doesn't count, you don't get to include him.”

“So you admit there is a pattern to exclude him from!” she says triumphantly.

“What, that I like to help people?” he asks. He puts the tray he'd used for breading into the dish rack with enough force the whole apparatus skids back a couple inches.

“Help... *save*... there is a difference, you know. Look, I'm not saying you *love* to see people in pain, but I do think you like being the functional one, the guy who will swoop in—”

“Yeah, that's me,” he says, pulling the drain at the base of the sink. “I pay my rent on time and vacuum the house twice a month, *clearly* I think this qualifies me to be some kind of hero.”

“Hey, you said the word, not me.”

He steals the towel from her shoulder to dry his hands. “Keep this up, see if I don't give him your room.” He throws the towel back at her face and turns away, but of course, *of course* she needs to have the last word as he rounds the corner for the living room:

“Please, like he's not staying in your bed.”

It's only when he's five steps into the living room that Daniel realizes

Susan has managed to neatly steer the conversation away from her own problems after he'd invited her to dry the dishes specifically so they could talk about them.

He stops in his tracks, wavering in annoyance. Johnny turns his head to look up at him questioningly from the sofa. He can only shake his head. He throws himself into his armchair and reaches for the book shoved between the cushion and arm, still shaking his head.

Other people are so much trouble. He doesn't know why he bothers, honestly.

Susan changes into a periwinkle blue nightgown of scandalous length which she covers with a fluffy purple robe of slightly less scandalous length and joins them in the living room for more TV. Daniel isn't even attracted to her and he still has to politely avert his eyes as she settles on the sofa; meanwhile, Johnny is gayer than a Spartan warrior and just as unperturbed at the sight of so much skin.

Daniel frowns and focuses on his book all throughout a loud rerun of L.A. Law; glances up conscientiously during the local evening news and weather; gives up and replaces the bookmark in his book when the Late Show with David Letterman comes on.

He wakes up to the muted zap and static of Susan switching the set off: the sudden absence of noise itself a type of loud.

“Wait,” he says, blinking and jerking in the armchair. “What?”

“You fell asleep in front of the TV like an old man,” she says. “Put you in a sweater vest and a pair of glasses, and you could be my dad.”

“Don't wanna be your dad,” he mumbles grouchily, but she isn't listening as she disappears down the hallway, her robe fluttering after her like a cape. He stirs some more, sitting up and glancing around. He pauses as he takes in Johnny, perched on the edge of the sofa: ankle jump-starting his knee, his hands fidgeting.

Right.

Before he can say anything, Johnny says, “I'll take the couch.”

“No,” says Daniel before his brain can catch up with his mouth, and

then he's stuck dealing with the aftermath: Johnny's knee settling, his spine straightening, his expression wiping clear.

And it gets worse. Johnny stands, palms scraping down his thighs; he walks over and offers Daniel a bruised hand. Without thought, Daniel takes it and lets him pull him out of the chair.

For the space of a hot breath, Daniel doesn't think about the past, be it the night before or ten years ago. He is caught in the feeling of Johnny's broad chest against his own, the alien intensity of being the sole focus of his gaze.

Jesus, how is it still like this, he wonders. He really had started to think his memory was just a combination of teenage dramatics and hormones.

“I,” says Daniel, and he can't stop licking his lip, because he does it and Johnny watches, and that only makes him want to do it again. He tries clearing his throat. Johnny still has his hand. “I'll take the sofa.”

There. Good. Or, rather, not good: bullshit, actually. But definitely better.

Probably.

For some reason.

Johnny's eyelids fall in a slow blink. He shakes his head, realization surfacing out of confusion. “No – what?”

Daniel takes a small step back, committing to the bit. “Yeah, I'll just __”

“It's *your* bed, man," he says, almost petulant. "You're already letting me stay here.”

“Yeah, and this is my couch. I bought it, I know how uncomfortable is is, and now I have to face the consequences of my actions.”

“Well, if that's the line you're going with, your bed's not that great either,” says Johnny, and he makes one of his bitchy valley faces Daniel had honestly forgotten all about until he sees it now again in all of its glory.

Daniel crosses his arms across his chest so he doesn't do anything reckless. He widens his eyes and nods. “*Wow*.”

Even in the dim room, Johnny's flush is obvious. “I'm just saying – you can take the bed.”

“I want you to take my bed,” says Daniel, and this time he doesn't hint at any possibility for compromise. He knows Johnny hears it in his voice, because his hands turn into fists at his sides, and he looks frustrated and tight.

And of course, the whole thing is stupid. If Johnny was literally anyone else – well, okay, mostly anyone else – Daniel would offer to share the bed. Because they're adults and it's really not that big of a deal. Daniel doesn't even move in his sleep, it's fine.

But he's trying to do right by Johnny here. And that means not sleeping with him – or *sleeping with him* – when he's a day out from some kind of big life crisis. Even if he clearly wants it.

And anyway, Johnny hasn't asked. He can lounge around naked or half-naked as much as he wants, but Daniel isn't doing a damn thing until he asks for him.

Chapter 11: A New Day

Johnny tosses and turns through a restless alcohol-free night and finally falls asleep some time just before dawn. When he wakes up, it's to a pillow that smells of only himself.

He shuffles out of the bedroom and into the bathroom, pisses absently. He flinches a little in surprise when Susan slams the door of the bathroom shut behind him, yelling something about men, and guess she really is a lesbian, huh?

He spares a glance for himself in the mirror, hand coming up to curiously brush the beginnings of stubble blurring his jaw. Last time he'd stopped shaving had been for Tommy's wedding weekend a year ago; it had been a few days before it was really noticeable. He wonders how long it might take him to grow a beard, and what that would look like. He angles his head to the side and squints out of the corner of his eye, trying to catch himself off-guard, see what that guy really looks like when he's not being watched. But mostly he just looks tired.

Johnny shrugs and and leaves the bathroom, heads out to the kitchen. Along the way, he eyes the blanket folded on the end of the sofa and shakes his head.

Never mind all the other fucking problems he was having with his life two days ago, the real problem with being a fuck up is sometimes people (or maybe just Daniel LaRusso) think you're too fucked up to fuck, and you can't even do anything about it because you don't want to fuck up an otherwise sweet set-up and like, fuck?

In the kitchen, Daniel is standing at the counter, shredding some white cheese. A carton of eggs and small dish of chopped meat sit waiting at his elbow. At his other elbow, a cup of coffee.

Susan is perched on the far end of the counter, also drinking coffee.

Johnny leans up from the dining area, looming over the side of the counter and looking between their cups. Daniel notices.

“I'll have to make a fresh pot,” he says and Johnny shrugs and takes a seat at the table. He rubs his face and looks out the nearest window, trying to peer past the curtains. Maybe he'll actually explore outside today.

Susan clears her throat and Johnny looks over, but she's looking at Daniel. Kind of pointedly.

Daniel sighs and reaches for the eggs. He takes a sip of coffee while cracking them one-handed: one, two, three, four. He sets his coffee down and says:

“So, Johnny. I uh, don't work until two today – if you're staying here, I figure maybe I can give you a ride back to your place so you can grab some of your stuff?”

And it's not that Johnny thought he could spend the rest of his days wearing the same pair of boxers and working his way through Daniel's shirts, but also he kind of did. Well, he'd wash the boxers.

“I'm not ever going back there,” he says.

“Oh my god, not this again,” mutters Daniel over his eggs. He begins to whisk them, impatience in the movement of his hand and he says, “Sorry, what? You're not going back to your apartment?” Johnny shakes his head. “What, like – ever? Never ever? What about – what about your rent or mortgage or whatever? Or all your stuff?”

“Don't need my stuff.” It's contaminated, he is sure of it.

“You don't need your stuff.” Johnny shakes his head. “Of course you need your stuff, everybody needs stuff. Stuff is what makes life worth living, or at least more comfortable.”

“So I'll buy other stuff. Different stuff.”

“Please stop saying *stuff*,” begs Susan.

“Look, man,” says Daniel, exasperated. “I'm not saying you have to *stay* there.”

Johnny stubbornly remains silent. He doesn't need anything that's back in that apartment. A clean, strong cut is what's best here, even if it's inconvenient. Like the toothbrush he has back there – sure, it's technically already been in his mouth, but also it belongs to a stranger. And anything's better than brushing his teeth with a stranger's toothbrush – though this thought reminds him he should absolutely figure out which toothbrush belongs to Daniel so he can use it later. His teeth feel scummy and awful.

Daniel pours his eggs into a pan and bends to adjust the temperature

of his stove. He straightens up and braces his hands along the edge of the counter. He regards Johnny levelly.

Johnny does his best to stare blankly back. He's not being disobedient, he figures. He just doesn't get it. Daniel can't get annoyed with him for not getting something, it probably goes against his code or whatever. The code of being a know-it-all.

“Do you think I'm trying to trick you or something?” asks Daniel, mystified. “Like I'm going to wait until I see you unlock your door and then drive off?”

This hadn't occurred to him, and frankly Johnny doesn't really care for how much it sounds like a ploy a pet owner would pull on a uncooperative dog. What the hell?

“I don't want any of that stuff,” he says loudly, “because it belongs to a miserable yuppie prick, and I don't want to look at it.”

To his surprise, Daniel immediately claps hard and steps back, hands in the air. “Look at that!” he says to Susan. “Progress! Communication! A clear articulation of thought and want!”

Johnny scowls and slouches over the table, head on fist.

“Yeah, you're a miracle worker,” she says dryly. She drains her coffee and hops down from the counter. “You're working late tonight, right?”

“Yeah,” says Daniel, returning to his pan. He reaches for the meat and cheese and scatters a handful over the eggs.

“Boo, no Friday drinks.” And she picks up her purse from the table, starts heading for the door.

“We'll do Friday drinks tomorrow,” says Daniel.

“Tomorrow's Saturday drinks,” she calls over her shoulder. “Completely different and you know it.”

And Johnny wants to ask but he doesn't want to seem, as she'd put it the night before, *needy*.

It's only, all the after-work drinks he's gotten in the past couple years have been with people he *worked with*, and therefore categorically fucking awful. Getting drinks with people who were kind of like him? people he kind of knew in a different life? people he didn't hate –

well. It sounds like it might be fun, or something.

Daniel finishes whatever he's doing on the stove and then brings over two plates of food to the table, and what he was doing turns out to be making an omelette.

A fork appears next to the plate in front of Johnny, and then Daniel hooks the chair to his left out with his ankle and sits in front of his own plate.

Johnny glances from the half-omelette to Daniel a couple times before muttering, *thanks*, and digging in. It's really good.

“Okay,” says Daniel after a minute or so of easy eating. He waves a fork and peers sidelong at him. “I accept your reasoning about the stuff in your old place – but there has to be some basic things you can safely grab without – I don't know, contaminating this new experiment you're running. Like, toothpaste! Surely your toothpaste and socks and shit are unobjectionable. What can they possibly say about a person?”

Johnny gives him a insulting look. “You have no idea how many thousands of man-hours are put in every year, determining what a person's toothpaste says about them.”

Daniel contemplates this, chewing thoughtfully. His eyes widen and he drops his fork, leaning forward; something in his expression makes Johnny lean back in equal measure. It's just that off-putting.

“Johnny, did you work in *advertising?*”

“*I* didn't,” he says, and he refuses to say anything more on the subject. But Daniel eventually gets him to agree to go scavenge what he can from his old apartment after breakfast.

The thought makes the omelette sit uneasily in his stomach. He doesn't want Daniel to see the place. *He* doesn't want to see the place – what if he backslides? Steps through the doorway of that cold apartment and transforms instantly back into a nervous pathetic wreck who let guys named Gerry who probably can't even run a mile treat him like shit?

“If we have time before my work, we can stop and get you some new clothes too,” says Daniel, seemingly oblivious to the way Johnny has gone silent and sick. “I don't know what's on the way – where do you live? Or did, I mean? And how do you feel about JCPenney?”

“*JCPenney*?” says Johnny, disbelieving. He is surprised into looking up from his plate. Daniel grins a little wryly.

He toasts him with his mug. “I don't know what kind of budget you're working with, but if you're not pulling in a paycheck right now, you might want to start thinking modest.”

Chapter 12: A Nice Drive

Daniel insists Johnny has to dress before they leave, even though he will literally just be sitting in the man's car and going directly into the apartment.

“C'mon, where are the clothes you were wearing the other night?” he asks.

Johnny folds his arms. “Threw them away.”

“You threw – right. Like actually in the garbage?” And when Johnny shrugs, Daniel cocks his jaw, looking sorely tested. “I should make you dig the pants out and wear them, marinara stains and all.”

And Johnny *knew* he should've tried feeding them to the garbage disposal. He doesn't move. “Is that what you want me to do?” he asks blandly instead, and he has to bite back a smirk when Daniel flushes. He'd forgot how fun it was, messing with him.

“How is this my life,” mutters Daniel, turning to walk down the hallway.

Johnny follows him closely into the bedroom and pitches onto the bed, bouncing twice in a squeal of mattress springs. It'd be so loud if they fucked on this bed, he thinks. There'd be no ignoring it, the whole world would have to know. He bounces again, testing and considering it, and he's not hard but there's a nice, rich weight in his cock at the thought.

Daniel casts a dark look over his shoulder at him before opening his closet and kneeling. “Why don't you make the bed?” he says, bending forward to rifle through what looks like a pile of clothes on the floor of the closet.

Johnny rolls onto his front, chin hanging off the side of the mattress. “Why?” he says, and he shifts his hips subtly, pressing down. “I'm just going to mess it up again.”

He sighs up at the ceiling. “Because – it's nice to go to sleep at the end of a long day in a bed that's made.”

“If you're not sleeping in it," he says with deliberate provocation, "what do you care?”

This is a perfectly logical question, so he doesn't get why Daniel gives him another dirty look. Johnny tucks his forearms under his chin and stares blankly back.

A moment later Daniel finds a pair of sweatpants. He throws them over Johnny's head before he can react to the pitch.

“Alright,” says Daniel heavily. “Let's go.”

The outside of Daniel's small house is a very ugly brown. And the worst part is, it looks like it has actually been repainted recently, which means he *chose* it. Johnny steps backwards five feet across the small stretch of lawn to see if there's a back yard, and he notices the paint job was actually abandoned halfway down the side of the house.

“Someone didn't finish repainting your house,” he points out helpfully. “Hope you didn't pay them.”

Daniel glances over from the lock on his garage door, distracted. His mouth flattens. “I didn't pay them – that *someone* was me. I got interrupted and haven't had a chance to get back to it. I'm really busy!” he adds, defensive even though Johnny hadn't said anything.

Johnny looks at the stretch of dirt and woodchips lining the front of the house below the main window of the living room. It looks like spots were made for some kind of plant, but this project was also abandoned. Huh.

He turns in place, looking around the street at the neighborhood. The other houses are all similar to Daniel's: modest and in varying states of upkeep. The blue house across the street has rosebushes out front and a neatly mowed lawn. The beige house next to it has a broken screen hanging askew from the front door. He turns back as Daniel drags his garage doors open noisily.

For some reason he expected to take the tow truck, but it's not in the garage. Instead, the garage opens to reveal an old pale yellow car, an antique.

“Hey, I remember this car,” he says, walking forward to examine it. Unlike the house, it looks to be in near-perfect condition. He skims a finger over a fender and examines it after: no dirt.

He hops over the door without waiting for Daniel and settles on the passenger side, throwing an arm up along back of the seat and looking around the interior with interest.

Daniel pulls the driver door open and gets in more sedately. He keeps glancing at Johnny, but he can't read his expression.

“This is a cool car,” he offers. He thinks about it and adds, “Suits you.”

Because it does suit him somehow, even though he can't quite figure out why. Daniel's not old-fashioned, but he has always been a little fucking gentleman, so maybe that's it. This is the car of a guy who'd park with a girl somewhere and not try to cop a feel; it's the car of a guy who'd walk her to the door after the date and ask permission before he kissed her on the cheek. And it's a shame, because it's also a car a guy could really fuck in. Bench seats. What a waste.

“Thanks,” says Daniel, unaware of the direction of Johnny's thoughts. He starts the car and puts it in reverse. He throws his arm up over the seat as he looks over his shoulder to back out of the garage, but his arm collides with the one already occupying the space. Johnny mutters *sorry* and quickly drops his arm.

“I need to get a car,” says Johnny as they drive through the neighborhood.

“Yeah, probably,” agrees Daniel. “Living around here without one can be pretty inconvenient.”

He drives like a dork, and it's distracting. Johnny thinks about twisting along the bench seat, putting his head on his lap beneath the cage of his arms at ten and two. Instead of doing this, he sniffs and taps the top of the door, looking around at the passing street.

“I seem to remember you having a pretty sweet set of wheels back in school,” continues Daniel. “What happened to that car? Or your bike?”

He shakes his head. “Weren't mine. Titles were under my stepdad's name.”

“Right,” says Daniel. He pauses and says neutrally, “So what happened there, if you don't mind me asking? Was Susan right? He cut you off?”

Johnny looks around, for some reason taken off-guard by the subject. He blinks and shrugs past it, well-practiced by now. “Yeah.”

“Was it because,” begins Daniel, and Johnny cuts him off with another *yeah*. “Oh. Well – I'm sorry. Lot of that kind of thing going around these days.”

There's not much to say about something that isn't there. It's like a part of himself has burnt away; he has to be careful walking around the ragged, crumbling edge, but it's fine. He works with what's left.

He looks over suddenly. “Did, did your mom – ?”

But Daniel shakes his head. “No. I've been pretty damn lucky, all things considered.”

And Johnny doesn't know what to say to that; he thinks agreement with such an obvious truth might come off as bitter, but he doesn't feel bitter about it. He's glad for Daniel. So he stays silent.

“You know Susan's parents think she's dating me?” Daniel says abruptly. He throws his head back with a short laugh and even slaps his steering wheel. “They don't have a *clue*. Fair warning – she might try to upgrade fake boyfriend from me to you.”

He shifts in the seat and casts Johnny a quick glance, a once-over dragging up his sprawled legs to his bare arms to his hair.

“Yeah, I think they'd like you just fine,” he murmurs, but he doesn't sound like he's still talking about Susan's parents, and for some reason it makes Johnny feel warm.

Chapter 13: No Returns

“Well, guess we won't have to go too far out of our way to get you new clothes,” says Daniel as they pass another shopping mall.

Johnny doesn't say anything; he's not stepping foot in Media City Center, but he's feeling anxious enough as it is without getting into that particular argument just now. He can already hear the exasperation in Daniel's voice as he'd demand *why not*, and then Johnny would have to figure out how to get out of the conversation without admitting he's been banned from the premises. No way is he copping to that fistfight with the shoe salesman at Macy's; he barely even won it (those foot measuring tools pack a real wallop).

“Take a left here,” he says, and they roll over the speed bump at the entry way of the Hill Terrace Condominiums; his stomach floats up with the motion of the car and doesn't come back down.

“Nice place,” comments Daniel, looking around curiously at the pale blue complex, the perfectly-maintained courtyard and swimming pool.

Johnny again says nothing. He wordlessly directs him to the parking space that used to belong to the Golf. Daniel eases into the spot and cuts the engine. Johnny doesn't move to get out.

He doesn't know if he'd rather Daniel stay with the car or come up to the apartment. But then Daniel climbs out of the car without asking and Johnny doesn't have to choose.

Daniel started presuming with him years ago. Back in school, it made him panic at first – but once he gave in and accepted it, he felt a lot calmer; sometimes in the moment, he was rock steady. Anchored. Then Daniel stopped presuming and he panicked again.

Now he just feels relieved.

“This won't take long,” he mutters once they get up to his door on the second floor. He keeps his head down as he flips through his keys and finds the right one to insert in the lock.

The door of his apartment swings inward, and he hesitates, body remembering the thousand times he has crossed this threshold to the hardwood floor on the other side: the pressure of the day inverting itself for the emptiness of the night. The silence inside poisonous like a

carbon monoxide leak.

Daniel puts his hand on the small of Johnny's back as he eases past him to step inside. He glances over his shoulder with a crooked smile, and his eyes are an almost unbearable weight, brimming with compassion.

“Like you said,” he says, “this won't take long.”

And it's easier to go in if he's following him.

“How long have you lived here, anyway?” asks Daniel. He stands in the middle of the living room and inspects the blank white walls. He barely seems to notice the big television, even though it's the only thing in the room to actually look at.

“Five years,” he says shortly, and he makes himself leave him there and go into his bedroom.

He moves quickly, heading directly for his closet. He takes out his gym bag and upends it, scattering odd bits of clothing. Once it's empty, he stuffs the bag full of socks and underwear from his dresser. He goes back to the closet and throws open the doors: collared shirts in a veritable rainbow of white, blues, and grays. He shoves them to the side. A couple thousand dollars worth of suit jackets and trousers: also no. When did he get so many cashmere sweaters?

He thinks he can stomach most of his gym clothes: shorts and T-shirts, the occasional tank. Those go in the bag. There is nothing else. He has a couple pairs of jeans, but he doesn't think they're the right kind somehow.

Next, Johnny sits on the floor and hauls off his stupid loafers, pitching them as hard as he can at the wall. He is just pulling on his running shoes and lacing them up when Daniel pokes his head through the door.

“Everything alright in here?” he says cautiously.

“Yeah,” says Johnny, and he grabs the gym bag. He almost stands but at the last second, an unthinking instinct sends him crawling back to the closet. He reaches into the far back corner and pulls out a dusty box.

“What's in there?” asks Daniel.

Johnny puts his gym bag on top of the box and stands with his burden. “Stuff,” he says, passing him.

In the bathroom he bypasses his toothbrush and toothpaste but grabs his half-full bottle of Listerine. He opens the medicine cabinet and sweeps its contents indiscriminately into the gym bag. He stares hard at the shower; no, he doesn't want that stuff. He doesn't want to smell like that guy anymore.

He pauses and calls, “You need any toilet paper? Or like. Towels?” He has nicer towels than Daniel. Daniel's towels feel and look like they were stolen from a Motel 6. But maybe nice towels are something only weak people need. He just doesn't know.

Daniel appears in the doorway. He leans against the frame and blinks at the pile of pill bottles threatening to tip out the open top of the gym bag.

“I think I'm good?” he says.

“Okay,” says Johnny.

In the kitchen, under Daniel's disapproving eye, he fills a plastic bag with the remnants of his liquor cabinet – a fanciful name for the cupboard above the sink. A couple years ago, Johnny had considered buying a proper cabinet, the kind Ali's dad had in his study, but it turned out he went through bottles too fast to ever bother with a decanter.

Johnny sets the tinkling bag down on the counter beside his cardboard box and gym bag with finality.

Daniel leans up beside him on his forearms, close enough to touch. He pushes his mouth out thoughtfully. “I guess you were right. You don't got much stuff.”

It's weird to look at him against the backdrop of the apartment: like a bit of colorful Oz in Kansas. In his work shirt, he looks a little like a plumber or something, and Johnny's seen pornos that started like this.

“Can I bring my TV?” he asks, and when Daniel blinks and angles a

quizzical look up past a wrinkled brow, Johnny ducks and kisses him.

It's light and close-mouthed, practically chaste, but his heart is beating like the whole world is watching him. He hasn't kissed another person in a couple years, and he thinks he might not remember how to do it. But Daniel rescues him. He straightens and turns into the kiss, softly opening his mouth to take Johnny's bottom lip between his own.

They kiss properly and Johnny almost forgets he is standing in his apartment. When Daniel breaks away, he has to turn and stare hard down at the counter. His face is hot.

“I guess that was kind of inevitable,” says Daniel, sounding more rueful than anything.

The tone makes Johnny feel distantly embarrassed, and he shifts restlessly in place, not looking at him. “If you say so,” he mutters. He should've blown him instead. Stupid. Always lead with your strong side.

Daniel sighs and his hand comes up, dragging back through his dark tumbling hair. “Look, Johnny – I'm not saying no. But we barely know each other—”

“Can we go?” he asks, reaching forward to drag his box and bags towards him. He thinks he can carry them all in one trip, which is good because once he goes through that door, he's not coming back. He tips them against his chest and steps away from the counter.

Daniel sighs noisily again. “Okay – hey, look. You want your TV?”

Johnny rotates and looks around his pile of stuff. Daniel gazes back, expression like he's offering a compromise.

“Sure,” he says.

He nods and rounds the counter. “I'll grab it, then.”

“And the VCR,” says Johnny quickly, because he absolutely noticed Daniel doesn't own a VCR, and who doesn't own a VCR? Johnny can at least give him a VCR.

Daniel just waves him off. Over his shoulder, he says, “Your answering machine is blinking, by the way. Also, maybe you should record a new message? Forward people to my number.”

But even though he just said the thing about them not knowing each other, he must forget Johnny doesn't actually know his number, because he walks out of the room without telling him what it is. This is fine by Johnny because he absolutely hadn't planned on leaving a forwarding number anyway.

He shuffles in places and looks at the answering machine. The digital readout says there is one new message.

After a moment, he pops the machine open and pockets the tape, figuring he'll listen to it on his Walkman later when Daniel has left for work.

Chapter 14: ...

Daniel makes a motion towards stopping at a shopping mall but Johnny begs off. He tells him he'll figure something out on his own. He doesn't need to be driven around like some kind of kid.

“If you're sure,” says Daniel, hesitating. “Since you don't have a car to get around, I mean.”

“So maybe I'll get that first,” he says.

Daniel glances between Johnny and the road. “You'll buy a *car* before you buy some pants?”

He only shrugs in response.

Daniel bites his cheek and purses his lips before breaking. And Johnny doesn't know what he's smiling at him for, but Daniel never really needed much reason to smile at anyone back in the day. Anyway, it's nice.

He puts his head back against the seat and closes his eyes. He's glad Daniel has a convertible. He should keep that in mind when he buys something: he wants to feel the world around him, the sun on his skin.

He's really not going back, he suddenly thinks, and he opens his eyes. He stares out at the lines of passing strips along Vanowen, concrete dotted here and there with stubborn palms clinging to their small patch of dirt, the sky rising brilliant out of the smog.

“You still do karate?” asks Daniel abruptly. Johnny blinks over at him, squinting against the sun. “I mean, it's just – years back, I remember hearing through the grapevine you were fighting in some big match. Then nothing.”

“I won that fight,” says Johnny. He doesn't often think about it, because it was easier that way. But when he does, he thinks about the feeling in the ring after that fight – it was a lot like riding in this car: heat on his skin, the world all around and even crazier: him living in it.

Daniel hesitates. “Okay.”

Johnny takes the hint from his expectant expression. He shuffles his feet in the footwell and says, waving a hand, “The people running the

fights started arguing about everything – money stuff, internal politics, that sort of thing. And then my stepdad cut me off a couple months later and – everyone told me I had to be realistic. Didn't want to end up in some hospital without health insurance, they said."

"Well, that's a good point," says Daniel, and Johnny just shakes his head. He can't even feel betrayed; of course Daniel wouldn't get it. He hadn't cared about the tournament back in school, after all.

They drive back to the house, and Johnny pays more attention to the route this time.

"Why Van Nuys?" he asks, as Daniel turns onto his street.

"Closer to the shop," he says. "I can't stand sitting around in traffic, and I like to walk to work sometimes when the weather's nice."

"This is California," says Johnny. "The weather's always nice."

Daniel rolls his eyes, but he's grinning a little. As he pulls into the drive in front of his cheerfully ugly little house, he clarifies, "I like to walk to work sometimes when the weather's nice and I'm not dead on my feet from swing shifts."

Johnny gets out of the car and bends to grab his TV before Daniel can try again; he'd nearly dropped it back at the condo. "So how long you stuck doing that, anyway?"

"I don't know," he groans, slinging Johnny's gym bag over one shoulder and tucking the VCR beneath his other arm. "I keep telling Lou we should hire someone short term before someone falls asleep over an engine block." He stops and looks at Johnny. "You wanna drive a tow truck?"

Johnny actually thinks about it. "No, don't think so," he tells him.

He looks resigned as he unlocks his door and shoulders inside the house. "Yeah, figured. No one wants to work the night shift."

Daniel clears out the bottom two drawers of his dresser for Johnny to puts his clothes in, and he insists that he put it all away immediately so he's not living out of a bag. Johnny does as he's told, feeling more comfortable with every passing second spent back in this house.

Daniel makes them sandwiches for lunch, packing his own into a little brown paper sack. He hesitates in the living room, flipping his keys

around his finger. He watches Johnny on his knees in the corner, messing with the cables for the TV.

“Don't do anything crazy like throw my set away, okay?” he says. “I'll need it again eventually.”

“Okay,” says Johnny, lifting the cords to squint at the color of the jack. It's so hard to tell the yellow and white apart in this light.

“I'm going to be home late,” he says. “Like – it'll be tomorrow basically. You know, like the other night.”

“Yeah, you said,” says Johnny, plugging the cord into the back of the TV. He sits back on his ankles, realizing he doesn't have any tapes to test the connection with. Oh well. Another thing to pick up at some point.

“Okay, well,” says Daniel, and Johnny realizes he's leaving. He twists around to blink up at him.

“You should take the bed tonight,” he says, and when Daniel starts to make a dissenting noise, he cuts him off. “No way you can sleep out here during the day. Don't be stupid.”

Daniel flips his keys around his finger again, catching them solidly in his palm.. “Okay,” he says at last. “Fine – yeah, thanks.”

He nods and shrugs; it's a weird thing to be thanked for, giving a man his own bed.

Daniel hesitates again, arm moving a little like he means to open the door but he doesn't really move. Johnny watches him, nonplussed. Then something tells him he should stand, so he pushes to his feet. And Daniel's head goes back slightly: in recognition, or maybe wariness.

When Johnny walks around the sofa, he drops his bagged lunch to the floor and steps into him, hands going into his hair to pull him down in a deep kiss.

Johnny holds him under his open work shirt, hands running over thin ribbed cotton, pulling it as he squeezes his waist. His hands are sure where his mouth is maybe still a little clumsy. But he gets the two of them back against the door and Daniel's hands tighten in his hair and he makes a noise and then another and—

“Okay, jesus,” says Daniel, tearing his mouth away. “This is crazy. What the hell.”

Johnny tucks his face into his neck and breathes him in. The hand still in his hair gentles, strong fingers rubbing at his scalp, and it's so weird, what that does to Johnny. He doesn't understand it – he has never understood it. And his body reacting to something he doesn't understand should make him angry; it has made him angry in the past, but it doesn't right now, not with Daniel. Understanding is almost irrelevant; either way, he feels solid, steady. (Safe.)

“I gotta get to work,” says Daniel, still a little breathless. “But uh – look, I'll see you tomorrow. We'll talk. Okay?”

In response, Johnny makes himself step back. Daniel stays pressed against the door as if by an invisible force, moving only his eyes as Johnny bends down and picks up his dropped lunch.

“Here,” he says, handing it to him. He doesn't understand what the look Daniel gives him means, or the next one, when Daniel glances down to the lunch in his hands and his brow pinches.

Johnny thinks about everything.

“You shouldn't overthink this,” he decides. Daniel's face comes up, and he look faintly incredulous: not good. “I mean – it's not complicated,” he tries, and the face doesn't get better. Johnny begins to feel uneasy. “I'm just saying, this was the problem last time too—”

“The *problem* last time,” Daniel begins, amazed voice climbing sharply before he abruptly shuts it off. He licks his lip and closes his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again, he looks determined and calm. He puts up a hand and says only, “We'll talk later.” And his hand goes behind him to the door, turning the knob. He's leaving.

“I just want to suck your cock, man. What's there to talk about?” says Johnny, and Susan is on the doorstep outside, key in hand.

A brief, horrific silence follows, and then Daniel brushes past her (*I see this is going well!* she says to him brightly), stalking across the lawn towards his car.

Johnny stands his ground, despite his face feeling hot enough to spontaneously set the house on fire. He meets Susan's eyes and says, “It's not complicated.”

Outside, Daniel reverses hard out of the driveway, bumping loudly over the curb as he turns onto the street too sharply.

She smiles in sarcastic commiseration and enters the house. She doesn't even have to say anything, but that doesn't stop her.

After all that, he's feeling too amped to settle down around the house, so he changes into a pair of shorts and grabs his Walkman and headphones. He remembers the answering machine message and decides his mood can't get worse; he pops the tape in, but recognizes Janice from HR's voice immediately. She is kindly reminding him he needs to return the Golf.

He pops the tape back out and drops it to the floor. He brings his heel down on the cassette. It takes a couple tries to crack the plastic. He steps over the remnants of the tape and crouches down next to his gym bag, rifling through the remaining jumbled contents until he finds Use Your Illusion I. He slots it into the Walkman and walks from the room.

In the kitchen, he runs himself a glass of water and drinks it down before settling on the floor out in the living room to stretch.

Susan comes down the hallway a few minutes later, and he asks her if she's going to be around that night.

“It's Friday, and I've taken an early day,” she says, like that's an answer. When he only squints, she says slowly, “So that's a no.”

“But I don't have a key,” he points out. He stands and grabs his left ankle, pulling it up and back. “What if I come back from my run and you're already gone?”

“I'll leave the back door unlocked,” she says after a moment of making a face at the foot he has on the floor for some reason. “Just – jump the fence or something.”

“There's a back door to this place?” he says, and she has to show him – what he took for a coat closet off the dining area actually opens to a small space with a steep, narrow stairwell on the left leading to an attic; on the right is a door looking out on a small back yard.

The afternoon sun beats down heavily on his shoulders when he steps

out the front a few minutes later, so Johnny pauses and strips off Daniel's shirt. He ducks back into the house to toss it over the couch. He checks that his Walkman is secured to the waistband of his shorts and slides his headphones over his head. He punches the play button. He points himself East and starts with an easy jog.

He thinks it's gotta be five miles, at least.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

story accompaniment

He was in his office after his Friday class, cigar cut and dispensing rich smoke. It was a date between him and the bottle, the papers from the lawyers turning the whole affair into a crowd. He had trouble reading them, could barely get through a paragraph before rage blotted out the words on the page. It was beginning to be a problem.

Why bother with all this, he thought again. The paper crumpled a little in his hand.

He was letting Terry set the terms of the fight. He should just go over there right now and they could settle it like men. When Terry was on his knees and bleeding, then he'd remember his place, and John's.

He heard the door to the dojo open in the main room. He glanced at the clock. Almost four; maybe it was Terry, coming to his senses, crawling back. He stood.

It wasn't Terry.

He was shirtless, chest and shoulders flushed and gleaming with sweat like a well-run horse. His breathing was already almost back to baseline; so he'd kept his cardio up, at least.

John folded his arms and scrutinized the tight spareness of his waist, the brace of his bare legs and slightly ropey quality of his arms. He'd lost weight, some muscle tone, but nothing insurmountable. He could probably be salvaged.

John brought his gaze up to those eyes, bright and still with expectation. Yes, he could be salvaged.

“Well, don't just stand there,” he said. “Show me what you got.”

Lawrence stepped out of his running shoes and bowed before coming onto the mat. As he approached, his expression shifted out of its customary watchful obedience: the fighter in him coming to the front

for a turn at the wheel. His body slipped into a wary prowl: there was John's deadly animal.

John struck first. Lawrence tried to dodge his grip, but when this failed and John threw him, he flowed with the motion, catching himself and turning it into a twisting handspring. His foot arced up in a swift kick, and it was John's turn to dodge.

They sparred for a minute longer, until John had seen enough. When the next fist came for his face, he caught it and said:

“Not bad, Mr. Lawrence.”

The fighter guttered and went out behind those wide blue eyes; Lawrence broke into a bright, hard grin.

He'd always been so easy to buoy up, or to crush. Like handling a ripe peach. But John knew there was a hard stone somewhere down in there. It was his duty to bring it out.

He noticed the darkness along the knuckles of the fist in his hand. He frowned at it, grip tightening. The boy's grin wavered, expression struggling not to flinch at the edges as pressure came to bear on the bruise.

“Your hands are your best weapon and you haven't been looking after them? I'd expect marks like this from a kid who'd never thrown a single punch."

“Yes, I'm sorry,” he said instantly. His eyes drop an inch, just enough to no longer be meeting his own. “It's – it won't happen again. Sensei,” he added, and there was a question in his tone, like he was asking permission to address him as such.

John didn't acknowledge the unspoken question. He dropped the fist. “See that it doesn't.” He turned back to his office. “Come. Let's talk Ultimate Fighting.”

He poured them both a glass of whiskey and gave him the rundown: an eight-man single-elimination tournament, no-holds-barred. No weight classes. All fighting styles. Winning through submission or knock-out.

“Yeah, I heard something about this,” said Lawrence, squinting down at the poster for the second tournament held back in March. His eyes lingered over *There are no rules!* “Figured the guy didn't know what he was talking about. Is this even legal? All fighting styles? Like, I could end up fighting a sumo wrestler?”

“You won't end up fighting anyone unless you get back into shape,” said John. “Training for this would be serious, it would need to be your number one priority. No distractions. Do you think you can do that?” he asked silkily.

Lawrence's eyes came up, determined. “I already left my job,” he said simply. “There's nothing else.”

John smiled in approval. He nudged the second glass over, and raised his own in a toast. They clinked the glasses and drank.

“You need to start conditioning immediately,” he said. “Luckily my classes are down to half time – summer sessions, you remember. I want you back here Monday morning, 7 o'clock. If you make me wait even thirty seconds, this is over.”

Lawrence straightened his seat, shoulders shaking out. “Yes, Sensei.”

“I will draw you up a meal plan. You are to follow it every day, no breaks or cheats – nothing goes in that body that I don't approve of beforehand. Enjoy that drink,” he added. “It'll be your last until after September.”

Like this was an order, Lawrence obediently tilted the glass, draining it in one smooth motion. In the air-conditioned office, the thin skin of his neck stood up in gooseflesh. His flush had faded, leaving him paler than he should be, like he spent too much time indoors. Bruises stood out along his ribs and shoulder like dark stratus clouds.

Lawrence considered the empty glass seriously, eyes shifting beneath a veil of pale lashes. He said quietly, “Thank you for doing this. It – it means a lot, that you think I even stand a shot at it after all this time.”

Tell Johnny Lawrence anything in the right tone, and it stopped being words: it became his whole reality. It was an intoxicating kind of power. John had forgotten.

“I've always believed in you, Johnny,” he said. “You were the best. A singular talent.”

Let Terry try to train his own fighters; let him try to take Cobra Kai from him and turn it into a flashy showcase for worthless couch potatoes who liked to sit at home watching real men move. John was going to show him and everyone the true way of the fist, the only way: his way.

He looked into Johnny Lawrence's relieved eyes and for the first time all week, he felt like he was back in control. The world made sense again.

Chapter 16: Dreamers Often Lie

The sun is just beginning to set when Johnny finally gets back to Daniel's house. He lopes up the sidewalk, staggers onto the lawn and flops down, panting hard.

The crabgrass is scratchy at his back, and he knows he shouldn't lie there very long if he doesn't want to deal with a rash later. So just until he gets his breath back. He wipes the palm of his hand down his stomach, swiping a runnel of sweat before it can curl itching around his side. He shuts his eyes.

Ten, eleven miles with a hard bout of sparring in the middle. He'll be lucky if he can stand again.

His brain is miraculously quiet; he feels almost drugged with exhaustion and purpose. If only every day could be like this one – he stops the thought, not wanting to ruin his buzz with longing. He had a good day. That's enough for now.

He cracks open his eyelids and looks at the deepening purple of the sky, the wispy streaks of cloud high overhead. His breathing settles. His pulse returns to its usual plodding resting rate.

He kind of wants to jerk off, but he figures he should go inside and do it. Roll around on Daniel's bed, surround himself with the smell of him while thinking about the approving weight of Sensei's eyes. Yes, fuck. Okay. Going inside now.

He hauls himself upright, wincing a little at how much stiffer he is than just five minutes ago. Shit, he needs to do some cool down stretching before he jerks off. Does he? He should. Sensei will be pissed if he shows up Monday limping. And he should probably shower too. He doesn't want to mess up Daniel's bed.

He shakes his head and heads to the side of the house, walking past the spot where the fresh paint ends. He considers the wooden fence before him. If he takes a run at it, he can probably swing up over. But his legs are practically useless right now, he's lucky to be standing at all. Maybe if he uses the side of the house as an assist—

He lands hard on the other side and stumbles forward a few steps, right ankle twinging. Not great. He should probably pop some Advil later.

He glances around the yard as he heads for the back door of the house, half-curious but too tired to investigate at the moment. There's a lot of dirt, is his general impression.

Inside the house, all the lights are off, and the living room is curtained and dark. He tosses his Walkman and the tape Sensei gave him on the coffee table. He settles in the spot he'd used earlier and runs through an impatient series of stretches. But every ache is a reminder; by the time he's done stretching out his legs, he's half hard and nearly delirious with it. He skips his arms. He has to.

He staggers down the hallway, bypassing the bathroom in favor of going into Daniel's room and throwing himself onto the unmade bed. He drags his shorts down, kicking them off, and shifts onto his stomach so he can drag himself against the mattress, clenching against nothing and thrusting into his dry hand.

He lets his mind wander where it wants and where it wants is everywhere at once: over him and under him, someone inside him, putting his body to good use, because they recognize what it can do and want it, want *him*. Johnny turns his head against the mattress, rotating hard along the axis of his forehead, trying to recreate the pull on his hair that would come from a strong hand. He makes a frustrated sound.

Daniel should come home from work right now. He should rush home, maybe leave the front door open in his single-minded determination to get to Johnny, who needs someone. Maybe he doesn't know? Maybe Johnny should call the garage up and beg over the phone, and then Daniel will rush home – barely remember to put the car in park before running inside the house and down the hallway, and here he'll find Johnny desperate and waiting, and all he'd have to do is say the word and Johnny will come for him. He wonders how long Daniel will keep him waiting; he'll wait as long as it takes if that's what Daniel wants, but he needs to say it or it doesn't count.

The thoughts twist and get confusing, because he remembers the feeling of Daniel's hand cupping the back of his head and the dark-eyed way he'd looked at him standing before him in a towel the previous morning and he remembers Sensei catching his fist and he thinks about Daniel pulling him down into a hard kiss earlier like he couldn't not touch him and he thinks about the rich satisfaction in Sensei's voice as he looked at Johnny's body, like he'd done so good just by existing and Sensei *likes that*—

Johnny comes with a long grinding groan, panting harshly into the mattress. After a long moment of his pulse pounding in his ears, he rolls over heavily and brings his hand up, quickly cleaning up the evidence with his tongue. And he means to get up then, take a shower and go drink a gallon of water, maybe find some food.

He passes out instead.

“Jesus, Johnny,” says Daniel some time much later, and Johnny stirs and peers up through light-sensitive eyes at the shadow standing over him. A pale glow is coming from the edges of the curtain: morning soon. But only soon.

“Thought you were going to take the sofa,” says Daniel, and he tugs at the line of bedding rumpled and twisted near the bottom of the bed. Johnny absently lifts his legs to free the sheet. He turns onto his stomach and pulls one of the pillows close, tucking it under his face.

“Meant to,” he mutters thickly. “But I guess I fell asleep after my run.” He swivels his eye up to the fussing figure. “Do you want me to go?”

Daniel sighs; he sounds defeated, but that's probably just exhaustion. “No, don't worry about it. I can just—” and he cuts off as Johnny's hand shoots out and wraps around his wrist.

“Please,” he says, and he thinks he might actually be dreaming, that's what this is. He's dreaming. That's why he can say it, and it's also why Daniel listens. *Please stay* and Daniel does.

The other man urges him backwards on the mattress so he can to climb in, and it turns out he wears flannel pajama bottoms to bed but no shirt, and Johnny can't decide which is more delightful as he shifts in close again after making room: the worn cotton against his soft cock and the bare leg he curls over Daniel's lap or the heat of Daniel's skin on his own as he throws an arm over his narrow chest. He's the perfect size for him. He hopes Daniel agrees.

“Well, who needs a blanket when I got you,” says Daniel. He sounds weird, but he isn't pushing Johnny off, and that's what matters most.

And he is surely dreaming, because after a moment Daniel shifts to free the arm trapped between their bodies, but only so he can get Johnny's head on his shoulder and a hand on his back, where he

sketches slow, reassuring shapes along his spine.

“What am I doing?” asks Daniel softly.

Johnny's arm and leg tighten around him. “Dreaming,” he says.

“Yeah.” His hand stops scratching along his back in favor of sliding down to pat his ass. “Must be.”

And then Johnny falls back asleep and dreams a different dream, but it's not as good.

Chapter 17: It's Summer

“Hey,” says Daniel, and Johnny turns his head and opens his eyes. The man is up and dressed already in a pair of cutoff jean shorts and a red tank that shows off his dusky shoulders. “You gonna sleep all day? C'mon, man, you went to bed hours before me.”

Johnny makes an indifferent sound and stretches; when he's done, Daniel's eyes have traveled down his body and are taking the scenic route for the trip back. Johnny flexes his feet beneath the sheet to contain the thrill of energy that goes through him at the thought he has been found pleasing.

“Yeah, but I practically ran a half-marathon yesterday,” he says.

He wonders if he can get Daniel to join him on the bed. He already gave in? What difference does it make now. Maybe Johnny should say please again. Maybe Daniel secretly wants to treat Johnny. Johnny will never know if he doesn't try.

“Jeez, really?” says Daniel absently, and he's sucking his bottom lip, worrying it with his front teeth as he looks Johnny over. “Guess we'll have to figure some other way of tiring you out in the future.”

Johnny holds himself very still, hoping and waiting, but then the man blinks hard and rouses himself from his thoughts. Daniel clears his throat and jerks his head back towards the door.

“C'mon, I made waffles. There's fresh cream and strawberries—”

“Really?” says Johnny, and then, heart sinking: “I mean, wait. I can't.”

Daniel pauses, eyebrows climbing. “You can't?” He starts to look concerned. “What's wrong, is your stomach—”

“No, I mean – I shouldn't. I need protein, not sugar.”

“But. I made waffles,” says Daniel again.

They stare at each other.

“There's protein in cream,” he continues, starting to sound a little affronted at the idea of someone trying to eat healthy. “And as for sugar – what are you worried about? You just said you ran a half-marathon yesterday. Way you slept, sounds to me like you *need* the

energy, actually."

Johnny hesitates, torn. He thinks about what Sensei said the day before.

"I whipped the cream myself, added a tiny bit of vanilla," says Daniel, coaxing.

And then he steps up close to the bed and leans over Johnny, and everything from the warm red of his shirt to the tan of his bare arms says to Johnny *it's summer, idiot*, but like – the old kind of summer. The one that meant long stretches of idleness and freedom and being whoever you wanted to be for the space of a few months.

"And these are *fresh* strawberries," adds Daniel, like it makes a difference. "Picked literally a few hours ago, I got 'em off a guy in a truck. They're beautiful. Here, see for yourself. I just got done hulling and slicing them," and he reaches out and places the pads of his index and middle finger on Johnny's lower lip in casual offering.

And Johnny's only human, so he opens his mouth and takes the fingers in, tongue automatically curling around the tips. He can taste the bright sweetness of the strawberry along the blunt edge of his nails, and it is good. It's summer, idiot. He shuts his eyes and drags his nose against the man's wrist in wordless agreement.

"C'mon, you'll love it," says Daniel, and he no longer sounds like he's asking; he sounds like he knows he's already gotten his way. "I swear."

And what's Johnny supposed to do? Daniel gave him his fingers. And anyway, it's Saturday, isn't it? He doesn't really start training until Monday morning.

He pulls on a fresh pair of shorts and steals another of Daniel's shirts, a heather grey with *Nowhere Tire & Auto Service* stamped in black across the chest.

Susan is at the table, hungover and hunched over a mug of coffee. She watches them come in and can't even muster anything scathing to say. Looking at her, Johnny immediately feels a hundred times better, because not being hungover is pretty amazing, and put with everything else about the morning, this means he's feeling better than he has in years.

"What are you so happy about," she grouses.

“It's summer, idiot,” he says.

He eats four waffles topped with four fat dollops of pristine fluffy cream and a heaping scattering of brilliant red strawberries, and he makes loud noises of deep appreciation. Susan looks alternately revolted and resentful and Daniel looks pleased. It all works out.

After breakfast they all migrate out to the living room, and he pops the tape Sensei gave him into the VCR.

“What is this?” asks Daniel from the armchair, blinking up from his book to the little animation of the fighter standing above a globe.

“New type of tournament,” says Johnny, leaning forward to watch eagerly. “It's crazy, they throw everyone in together – it's karate, wrestling, boxing. You name it. Best of the best.”

Susan lifts her head from the armrest of the sofa and squints at the TV. “Is this what you're going to do, Johnny? Mortal Kombat?” Then she sort of sighs and whimpers, tucking her hands tightly around her middle. “I want to make a 'finish him' joke so bad, but I'm too hungover. Imagine I did and it was really funny, okay?”

Johnny glances between her and Daniel, hesitant. Daniel was always weird about fighting, and Johnny doesn't know how he'll react to his plan. But he also doesn't want to lie about it. It's him, it's his thing. His one thing. He doesn't know what he'll do if Daniel doesn't accept it.

“What is she talking about?” asks Daniel.

“Haven't you ever played Mortal Kombat?” he says, intentionally reaching for the misunderstanding.

“I meant—”

“I'm going to try to qualify for the next tournament,” he says quickly. “It's in September. Gives me a few months to train. Get some fights under my belt, and I think I might have a shot. And if not this time, then definitely the next.”

Daniel's brow furrows. “*This* is your plan?” His eyes are drawn back to the screen, where one of the fighters is being highlighted. He's a sumo wrestler. Johnny might get to fight an actual sumo wrestler.

“Prize is $60,000,” he says and shrugs to conceal his anxiety. He watches Daniel closely from the corner of his eye, on the look-out for any sign of disapproval. And Daniel doesn't look too happy, but he doesn't appear about to kick Johnny out of his house either. Mostly he looks confused.

“Why do you want to do this?” he asks finally. “I mean, Johnny – I know you were the valley champ and all that back in the glory days, but you could do anything now—”

“I like it,” he says quickly. “And I'm good at it.” He looks back at the screen, at the long walk the sumo wrestler is making towards the ring-that-isn't-a-ring. “And I think I could be *really* good at it. Push my limits – and I mean, *look* at this, man,” he says, springing to his feet and pointing as the two fighters begin to circle each other. “This is everything, this is the *real deal* – finding out which style is the best? Who can take who? Like, I could fight a sumo wrestler!”

He feels like he could run another ten miles just thinking about it. Daniel watches him, looking unwillingly charmed for some reason.

“Why would you want to,” he says mildly. “Look at the size of that guy.”

“Exactly. Imagine me taking him down. It'd be like trying to fight a brick shithouse. It's not a matter of brute strength, it would have to be like, pure artistry.”

And Daniel shakes his head, bemused, but he doesn't say anything about not wanting Johnny around or issue any kind of ultimatum about fighting. He just shrugs and goes back to his book.

And, alright. That's alright? He did good? He told the truth and wasn't rejected. That means something.

“So you've played Mortal Kombat, huh,” he says to Susan, flopping back down on the sofa.

She twitches and blinks away from the screen. “Took my girlfriend to Golf N' Stuff one time to show her the places I used to hang in my youth.” She shrugs lifelessly. “It was one of the new games we played in the arcade.”

Daniel glances up, checking on her with just his eyes. “You think you'll be recovered enough by tonight to come out?” he asks lightly, and Johnny tries very hard to not look too curious or desperate to be

included. “Everybody's gonna be there. Even Babs got the night off.”

Everybody's going to be there, Johnny thinks. Does that mean Johnny is going to be there too?

“I suppose I might as well,” she says, unenthused. “Now that I have no one to lie about, I mean.”

“That's the spirit,” says Daniel, and he turns a page in his book and goes back to reading.

Chapter 18: S-A-T-U-R-D-A-Y NIGHT

In the late afternoon, Johnny finds himself in the backyard, watching Daniel pace around nudging bags of dirt and piles of lumber as he explains himself.

“I know it doesn't look like it,” he says, planting his hands on his hips and frowning around the yard, “but I've actually done a lot of work back here.”

Johnny scans the space – it's about 40 by 70 feet and lined with a tall, newish wooden fence that looks like it was erected less for privacy than to shield the disastrous eye sore from the neighbors. Unlike the long-suffering front yard, there isn't even any grass back here. Much of the lawn is churned up in piles of dirt. The area near the house has been marked out for some kind of deck, but beyond the piles of supplies no progress has been made in furtherance of this goal. Man needs a project timeline, thinks Johnny, but he'll slit his own throat before he says the words aloud.

“Yeah, looks like it,” he says instead. “What were you doing out here, digging for treasure?” He wanders around and ends up standing over a long channel running the length of the back fence. He looks around at Daniel and points down. “Trench warfare?”

“Lavender bushes,” says Daniel, aggrieved. He squats down next to an open toolbox and waves a hand, distracted. “I mean, eventually. I don't know, I think maybe I should get the soil tested. The book said —”

“That's your problem,” he decides. “Spend all your time reading about what you want to do instead of just doing it.”

Daniel looks up sharply. He has a large book open on the ground in front of him, and under Johnny's gaze, his hand flutters down to the page of diagrams like he wants to conceal it, even as he's retorting:

“Oh, I'm *sorry*. I didn't realize you were an expert on gardening and construction.” Johnny shrugs. He's not, and he doesn't care about admitting it. “Maybe I want to be sure of what I'm doing before I invest time and money into a project.”

“Hey, your yard, man,” he says.

“I had a plan – have a plan,” continues Daniel, correcting himself. “I sketched it out somewhere, can't find the notebook now. But I was going to have flowers lining the fence, and then I was going to plant a monkey puzzle tree in the back right – and my deck was going to stretch out to about here, before maybe narrowing to form a boardwalk to the tree, and there's gonna be a bench—”

Johnny looks again around the demolition zone. He can't envision what Daniel is talking about, but he doesn't really need to, he figures. He turns and walks back to Daniel.

“Never mind all that now,” he says, nodding at the book. “What's the first step for the deck? Just tell me what to do.”

Daniel looks surprised for some reason. “Oh. I was just talking out loud. I wasn't gonna – I mean, you don't have to.”

Which is a really weird thing to say to a guy who isn't paying rent. Jesus, Daniel never would survive a condo association.

He scratches a finger along his neck and squints down at him; Daniel blinks back, uncertain. Slowly, deliberately, Johnny lifts a foot and plants it on the man's chest. He shoves lightly and Daniel tips backwards, sprawling. Yeah, still kind of a twerp, turns out.

“Don't be stupid,” says Johnny, and when Daniel's mouth drops open a little in outrage, he smirks a little and bends to steal the book. He frowns at the diagram and flips pages backwards until he finds the first part of the chapter. “Attach the ledger,” he reads aloud. He offers the book back to Daniel. “Let's do that.”

Daniel pushes up to accept the book back, eyes moving over Johnny like he's done something unexpected. “Okay?” he says.

“Okay,” says Johnny.

And it turns out Daniel knows plenty about construction. He seems to use the book as a focusing tool more than anything else; his brain frequently starts wandering down five separate paths of to-do lists and future plans and needs. When this starts to happen, Johnny asks what he should do next, or for Daniel to show him something, and this usually pulls him back from the mental spider web.

It's a good time, doing something with physical results under the afternoon sun. He gets a little punch drunk from Daniel's attention and direction, and he gets to watch the man's hands move assuredly over

the side of the house: the brace of his fingers, and bend of his wrist beneath his ugly, clunky wristwatch.

Johnny thinks they make good progress. They attach the ledger, anyway.

In the evening, Susan comes down the hallway freshly showered and made-up like some kind of Rebound Depression Barbie, and Daniel emerges from his bedroom in a pair of well-fitting jeans and a short-sleeved blue floral-print shirt. Johnny fidgets on the sofa and pretends not to care about the movement all around him.

“Call the cab, would you,” Daniel tells her, and he says to Johnny, conversational, “We used to rotate playing DD, but Susan and the others frankly abused the system. So now we're stuck spending a small fortune every damn time.”

“Oh?” says Johnny, nodding blindly at the television. God, what's he going to do when they leave and the house gets quiet and dark?

“Hey, you wanna come?” says Daniel.

Johnny's eyes dart over and up, but still he plays it cool, like oh, *maybe* he's interested but he really needs to hear a little more about it before making his mind up.

“You'll know maybe one or two other people there – hey, Susan,” he calls over his shoulder. “Johnny's coming.”

She pokes her head around the corner from the kitchen, phone tucked into her neck. “Keep in mind, we're also picking up Babs and Vickie – Arthur took the kids and the car for the night.”

“Okay, and what's Vickie's excuse?” asks Daniel.

“The usual – she's cheap? Anyway, gonna be a tight fit.” And she narrows her eyes at Johnny like he's a problem. He stares blankly back; it was Daniel's decision, after all. Not his fault.

“So Johnny'll sit on my lap,” Daniel says blithely, and Johnny knows he's joking but his face flames anyway.

He sits up on the sofa, twisting to follow Daniel as he walks over to

the kitchen table. “Uh, so do I need to,” change, he means to say, but he realizes he doesn't have anything to change into; maybe he should move up that whole shopping trip.

Daniel seems to know what he meant anyway. He sits to put on his shoes and says easily, “Nah, you're good – place we're going to is pretty casual, and it's on the beach, anyway. You'll fit right in.”

And it should be comforting, a relief – and it is. Except Johnny looks at Daniel sitting comfortable in his loud shirt, and Susan in her pretty summer dress, and he feels ill-fitting somehow. Half-invisible, incomplete. And jesus, he never really cared what clothing he put on his body before, so he doesn't know what this feeling is about, why he's suddenly noticing it.

The cab arrives twenty minutes later, a rust-brown Crown Vic that Johnny highly doubts is licensed, and they pile into the back. Daniel gives two addresses, both in Encino, and they pull away from the house.

Johnny looks back at it shrinking in the distance. He needs to get some wheels, he thinks.

“Where we going, anyway?” he asks Daniel, who is digging around at his side, trying to unearth the middle seatbelt.

“Kala's Beach House. You know it?” And when Johnny shakes his head, he says, “Oh, it's great. They got a band playing tonight, great dance floor.”

“I don't dance,” says Johnny, and then he pretends he didn't say that, because obviously Daniel wasn't like, *asking*.

“No?” says Daniel easily, swinging his knee to knock Johnny's. “Just fistfights with cars when Johnny Lawrence drinks? We'll see about that.”

And *no*, clearly he doesn't usually fight cars when he drinks, because usually he drinks alone at home. This answer sounds depressing even in his head, however, so he stays silent.

At their first stop in Encino, a dark-haired woman with sleepy eyes and an unidentifiable drawl that cannot possibly be real joins them; they squeeze tight and make do. Introductions are made across the length of the backseat – Vickie, Johnny; Johnny, Vickie; Vickie's a grad student getting her PhD in anthropology at UCLA; Johnny's a

karateka; what's a karateka?; ask again when we're on the beach, maybe he'll show you.

The driver cranks his stereo, blasting Willie Nelson so loud, Johnny almost imagines he smells weed in the car.

At the second stop, a sleek blonde who looks vaguely familiar bends at the waist to peer past Johnny into the back of the cab. Then she does a double-take and looks at him in surprise.

“Aren't we too old for this?” she asks plaintively, shaking off the moment. “We're not in college anymore.”

“I am, technically,” says Vickie.

“I never was,” says Daniel.

“You want to wait another ten minutes and pay full-price for a cab to Venice Beach all by yourself, be my guest,” says Susan.

So the woman circles around to the other side and opens the door, and they all start shifting and compressing. *This isn't going to work*, mutters Daniel a second before he unbuckles his hard-won seatbelt and shifts over to sit on Johnny's lap. The girls all scoot left in relief and the door is successfully shut.

More introductions: is that Johnny Lawrence?; yeah, long story; wow, hi Johnny!; hi; do you remember me?; yeah, of course; this is so crazy, hey, why didn't you come to the class reunion last month?; I was, uh, busy that night.

Johnny feels frozen, and Daniel must feel it because he looks away from talking loudly over Susan to give his opinion on the tradition of class reunions.

He meets his eyes and asks in an undertone, “This okay?”

He's a warm and lively weight in Johnny's lap and doesn't seem to feel remotely awkward about it: about being seen by the girls or the cab driver, or what people might think about him. And he's always been like this, but unlike in school, Johnny feels like he might be able to join him: a little, for a while. He can try to live, or pretend to, for a night.

Safely unseen by anyone else, Johnny slowly brings his left hand up to brace the other man's lower back, so he's not resting too heavily

against the hard ledge of the door.

“Yeah,” he says and he tries a smile.

Daniel grins and bounces his eyebrows and goes back to shouting at the girls. After a second, he hooks his ankle around Johnny's calf.

Chapter 19: ...

Chapter Summary

story accompaniment

Johnny figured the group for the night was going to be the one in the car, but it turns out to be barely half; Daniel leads them winding through a crowd beneath the thatched roof of the Beach House, and at a large table at the edge of the space leading out onto the beach, there is is already a large group waiting.

The others file in to fill out the rest of the table and the air starts to get criss-crossed with shouted greetings and restarted conversations. Johnny hangs back. He doesn't know almost anyone and doesn't want to end up sitting between two strangers.

Behind them across the dance floor, a band kicks off a skittering uptempo number, and ragged cheers break out around the room. He avoids looking at the table in favor of glancing around at the strings of little yellow lights and the tiki torches being lit out on the sand. He shifts behind Daniel, chest brushing his back. He doesn't mean to do it, but can't regret it happens.

“Oh, right, sorry,” says Daniel over his shoulder at him, breaking off from telling the old man at the end of the table that *he didn't steal his shirt, he merely borrowed it, jeez.* “Everyone, this is Johnny. Johnny, you might remember Walter from school,” and Johnny absolutely doesn't, but he nods at the large guy in the middle of the table anyway, “and that's Nina, his girlfriend. Then we got my baby cousin Louie – apologies in advance,” *hey*, protests the gangly guy with the wispy mustache; sitting next to each other, he and Walter look like some kind of scrappy comedy duo from Vegas, “and then we got the lovely Chelsea, who Louie somehow convinced to date him. And finally, this is Yukie and Noriyoshi Miyagi – that's *Mister* to you. And, heh, uh – you might remember each other!”

Johnny looks over Daniel's shoulder to meet the eyes of the old Asian dude, and his stomach drops. Last time he saw this guy, he was going toe-to-toe with his sensei on their own turf. Time before that, he took out Johnny and all his friends in less than a minute.

“Hi,” says Mr. Miyagi, forbidding.

“Yeah,” says Johnny. “Hi.”

The grey-haired woman glances sidelong at her husband and smiles like his imposing visage is something lovable and cute. “So severe? Welcome,” she says up to Johnny, and she extends a hand to the two remaining chairs at the table. “Sit, sit. Daniel-san, you did not mention a new friend?” She glances again at Mr. Miyagi. “Or is it – old friend?”

Daniel drags both chairs out and takes the one at the corner next to Mr. Miyagi. “Me and Johnny knew each other in high school, yeah – he sort of fell out of the sky a couple days ago and well – here we are.”

Johnny sits in the other chair. He doesn't know if he should say anything. What is the etiquette for meeting an older man of ill-defined relation to the guy whose house you're staying at? Add in the fighting back in school? Add in that Johnny wants to have sex with Daniel? Add in that the man is a karate master? (Could he still beat Johnny?) Add in that *he* still hasn't said another word *either*?

A waitress arrives, asking if she can get the newcomers any drinks and Johnny blurts *yes!* before she has even finished the question. Luckily, the woman is a professional and only smiles and asks him what he'd like.

Liquor might be a tell, and anyway, he doesn't want to drink too hard – he has training on Monday. He's already technically cheating.

The waitress is waiting. The others are looking at him, probably. He casts about quickly for something else and from nowhere pulls out a request for a Coors. He thinks he might have drank it at the bar on Wednesday. It was fine? Probably.

Meanwhile, Daniel keeps chattering at Yukie, but he reaches beneath the table and lays a hand over Johnny's jumping leg. His fingers rub his bare kneecap, strong and sure.

“Wait, I remember you,” says the Walter guy. He leans forward over his crossed arms and Johnny tenses again. He points and snaps his fingers. “Yeah, yeah – that's right, you were that guy. That twerp who was always messing with Dan.”

Johnny's vision almost swims from a sudden bout of dizziness, like the earth itself has stuttered in its rotation.

“*Me*?” He forgets himself and leans forward as well, going eye-to-eye

with the guy. “I wasn't the twerp. Daniel was the twerp.”

“He really kinda was,” puts in Susan, and Johnny decides he likes Susan; he has always liked Susan. She broke Tommy's heart but he guesses now that she's turned out to be lesbo, it's probably for the best; he saw Tommy's dick in the showers back in the day. It's *really* big. It'd be such a waste.

Johnny still has no idea who this guy is, but from the way he's talking, he went to their high school. So he can at least set some things straight.

“Like, are we talking about the same guy? *This* guy?” he asks, jerking his thumb to his right. He looks at Susan and Barbara. “Remember when Daniel basically drove our gym sub into a nervous breakdown just from talking at him?”

“Is that what happened?” wonders Barbara. “I always wondered why we spent the last few weeks of that semester basically unsupervised.”

“That was awesome,” says Susan.

“Never said he wasn't a talker,” says Walter, grudgingly subsiding once he sees the girls aren't picking up the good fight on Daniel's behalf. It is almost a pity, thinks Johnny. Fighting him could be good practice for the sumo wrestlers.

“Hey, are you bad-mouthing me?” demands Daniel, finally turning from his weird elderly friends.

“They were, cuz,” volunteers the kid across the table: twerp-adjacent for sure. “I was about to jump in to defend the family name, I swear.”

Drinks arrive and they orders several platters of food to share. Johnny doesn't talk a whole lot, but then he never really has in group settings. He's okay to drink his beer and listen to the flow of voices. Somehow it's different doing it at a table than alone on a bar stool, even if he's silent in both cases.

Maybe it's because there's a live band in the place: the kind of bright, brassy music that makes people want to wriggle their hips and spin across the dance floor. It's a little like standing on the side of a fight: you know no one is looking at you because they're busy watching the

action.

Maybe it's because the company and the simple fact that, as a member of the table, he can appear to listen to a conversation without looking like a creep. He doesn't have to pretend the rest of the occupants of the room don't exist, like he just happened to find himself out in public among them and means nothing by it, honest.

Or maybe it's because Daniel.

He doesn't even spend much time talking to Johnny, is the thing. He's far too busy: leaning over to say something to Mr. Miyagi and Yukie below the music; crumpling a napkin to throw at his cousin when he complains about staying with Daniel's mom; calling down the table to add commentary to whatever discussion he catches wind of that he decides he has an opinion about.

Daniel seems to absorb everything at once and only grow brighter and stronger, and it's not anything Johnny doesn't remember from school, it's just different experiencing it at his side instead of across a room. Because he looks at Johnny occasionally, and it's like he's sharing a bit of that of that light with every glance and smile.

Johnny doesn't really know what to do with it. He's helpless not to look back, just like he always had been. Nothing happens, though. It's fine.

After the food has all been eaten, half the table empties in favor of dancing, the Miyagis leading the way onto the floor. Daniel half-jokingly reaches for Johnny's hand, but Johnny pulls his arm away before he can make contact because, christ. But Daniel only laughs and grabs for the next arm – Barbara's. They fly out onto the floor.

“You don't dance?” Johnny asks Susan, after looking around to see who is left and finding only the cousin and his girlfriend, who are whispering or maybe making out?

“Nope,” she says. “Number six on the list of my ex's complaints, if you can believe it.”

She lifts her Mai Tai and drains it and then spends the next several seconds staring at the bottom of the empty glass. He looks at her semi-glazed eyes and both does and doesn't know the emotion there; he has felt like this before, he is pretty sure, but also he doesn't think he has ever had his heart broken. So what does he know?

“She *numbered* her complaints?” he asks eventually.

She shakes her head. “No, that was me – thought it would be easier to address everything if I was organized about it.” She smiles at him, wan.

“Your ex sounds like a bitch,” he says, and Susan hiccups on a surprised laugh.

They watch the others dance for a few minutes. Johnny finishes his fourth beer and looks around with vague regret for the waitress, who does not materialize.

“You ever wish you were like him?” Susan asks abruptly. Johnny follows her gaze to where Daniel is twirling Vickie around, his eyes lit up and warm even from across the room. “I mean – you know, able to do both,” she clarifies. She sits back in her chair and looks around like she also wants the waitress to appear. Her tone turns absent. “I've always wondered, why he bothers. Like, fuck. He could have it so easy.”

“Yeah, I guess,” says Johnny, who is still not used to talking about this kind of thing out loud, let alone with another person. He is a little relieved Susan seems to feel more like he does than Daniel, though – she gets it. Johnny isn't making it up. The world really is like that.

He looks again at Daniel on the dance floor, moving so carefree and loose. He is a world away from the Johnny and Susan at the table, and he looks happy. But happiness always seemed closer at hand for him. This is nothing new. Some people are just built for it, Johnny thinks.

They both get another drink and by that time the song has ended; the band takes a break and the house puts on a stereo in its place.

Daniel returns to the table like a Viking after a successful raiding party. His hand wraps around Johnny's wrist with a lack of compromise that would be promising in any other context, and he tugs.

Johnny stares up at him, wholly unwilling.

Daniel rolls his eyes. “C'mon. Don't you hear that? You don't need to know how to salsa to dance to this stuff.”

“I don't dance,” he reminds him.

But he has underestimated what this environment does to Daniel, he realizes a second later. He has also underestimated how drunk the other man is – he is flushed, his eyes more black than brown. And where intoxication might make another person giddy and loose, it only seems to make Daniel slow and assured – arrogant, even. The world *must* be as he sees it; he already half-thought it sober, and now the veil has been stripped away.

Johnny just wishes he found it less appealing.

The song on the stereo changes and a second later, a delighted Barbara goes *oh god, yes!* Before Johnny can react, she has pulled Daniel – and via Daniel's hand around Johnny's wrist, *Johnny* – onto the floor.

Johnny stands in the middle of moving bodies. “This doesn't seem like a dance song,” he points out.

But Barbara is already moving; she nudges Daniel and like some kind of fucked up Rube Goldberg machine, Daniel nudges Johnny in turn. Johnny makes himself like stone and does not sway.

Daniel frowns and stops dancing. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says. “I just don't want to dance to this. I hate George Michael.”

Daniel's eyes shoot wide and he catches his elbow. “Don't let Barbara hear you say that,” he says.

His face twists in confusion. “What do I care if she hears?”

Daniel looks exasperated but follows him off the dance floor. When they get back to the table, he hunches onto his elbow and watches him quizzically while casually crunching on the basket of popcorn someone has dropped onto the table at some point.

Johnny applies himself to the fresh beer Susan must have ordered him. He notices the other man's look. “What?”

“You really don't like to dance, or is this just not your music?” asks Daniel.

He squints. “Why?”

Daniel shrugs.

Johnny doesn't really respond and eventually Daniel is drawn back to the floor. But the question sticks with Johnny – not whether he likes the music, because he knows he doesn't, but whether he likes to dance. He doesn't think he has danced since nights at the country club. Looking at Daniel go, he thinks maybe that might not even count.

He wonders what would.

Chapter 20: The Wrath of Grapes

It's hard to remember all the things he has been trying to keep at the forefront of his mind when that mind is brimming over, tipping sideways and it's fine because Johnny catches him mid-lurch with his chest, and what. a chest, like wow. No way Johnny was this big back in school, Daniel woulda remembered.

“I've never seen someone actually get drunk off wine,” says the Johnny in question.

“That's a lie,” says Susan adamantly, because she is also drunk. “Remember – god, what was her name. Henry Whatshisface's mother. Every fucking dinner at the country club. It was so embarrassing.”

“McCallister,” says Johnny, and he's not paying enough attention to Daniel, it's so wrong. Daniel digs his chin into that chest and leans more heavily. What's he gotta do here, cop a feel? He's a gentleman, he'd never. Even though Johnny is just wearing a pair of slinky nylon shorts and it'd be so easy, and he bets Johnny would be easy because he always is for Daniel.

“Mrs – *Fucking* – McCallister,” says Susan at the top of her voice, triumphant like it was her idea.

“Her parents must've hated her,” jokes Daniel, sliding off that chest and around the back, tightening his arms around Johnny's waist when he tries to turn along with him. “You'd think she'd-a changed her name when she got married – I mean, you're already *there*, you're already doing the one....”

Neither of them laugh, but what*ever*. Daniel is hilarious, he knows they secretly agree.

Susan lifts a key up to the streetlight and squints at it before shaking her head and going to the next. And it must be the right one, because she turns back to the walk. They follow her up to the door of his house; Johnny keeps a hold on Daniel's wrists over his hips like he thinks he'll let go otherwise, but Daniel's not letting go, he's doing the Conga: one, two, two, kick!

“Mrs McCallister used to put back *so* much Merlot,” says Susan from the front step, “the people – Napa should,” and she trails off, because it's actually pretty hard to keep to a through line on a joke when

you're drunk; not everyone is as skilled as Daniel.

He puts mouth to Johnny's back and says agreeably, “Napa,” popping the *pa* against one of the knobs of his spine through the stretched cotton of his shirt, Daniel's shirt. Daniel's shirt on Johnny.

“Can we just get inside?” asks Johnny, and Susan shakes her head and returns to the door.

They get inside. Johnny turns and pushes Daniel over the back of the sofa like someone tossing a coat down, and Daniel goes with it because he is feeling accommodating. He lands with his head hanging off the seat cushions, scrutinizing the sight of Johnny's television set from upside down.

“I think it's too big,” he says. “I think my cabinet might collapse beneath the weight of it.”

“Here,” says Johnny, appearing in front of him again with a glass of water. “Sit up and drink this.” Then he turns to Susan, who is still by the door struggling with the straps of her heels. “Here, you too. C'mon, take it.”

“So this is what it's come to,” she says heavily, dropping her heels on the floor. “Johnny Lawrence.”

“Johnny Lawrence,” agrees Daniel, popping up onto his knees on the cushion.

He likes saying his name so he says it again, and he lifts his glass of water in a toast; Susan roughly clinks her glass against his and they both drink.

“If you're gonna have sex, keep it down,” she says, passing them and heading for the hallway.

And oh shit, they're totally going to have sex. And that's one of the things Daniel has been trying to keep in mind, but his mind is sparking, brightening with interest as he turns back to Johnny. Why shouldn't they have sex? They totally should.

Daniel has never forgotten the sex they had back in school, and it should be so fucking sad, the best sex he's ever had being the first sex he's ever had, like that shit is supposed to get better! And he's tried explaining it to people once or twice, but it doesn't matter if you throw around phrases like *an almost-frightening natural chemistry*, they

still look at you with pity, but what's to pity? Johnny Lawrence is here.

“Johnny,” he says, decisively standing up on the sofa.

Johnny eyes him warily. “What?”

Daniel smiles and shakes his head, sighing. He leans over the back of the sofa to put his elbows down on the other man's shoulders, and what. shoulders.

“Johnny, Johnny, Johnny,” he says into his mouth, and he presses a quick kiss as a follow-up, like a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence. See, this kiss is a period. And *this* kiss is an exclamation mark, and this one is a question mark.... so these must be ellipses? Ellipses can have ambiguous meaning, they are heavily dependent on context and the context here is that Daniel wants Johnny like, now. And he's going to have him, right, because that's basically what Johnny's been saying ever since he wandered back into Daniel's life like a very hot, very sad puppy that knows he should be treated better than he has been. Yes, okay, great plan.

“Come, we're going,” he announces regally, and he keeps a hand on Johnny as he walks the length of the sofa and hops down over the side – slips a little on the landing, but Johnny lunges to catch him before he hits the floor, and god, the sex is going to be so fucking hot. He wonders if Johnny still blushes all the way down his torso.

And, god, Johnny can probably do like, anything, and what he wants to do is basically whatever Daniel wants to do, and Daniel wants to do anything and everything. What time is it? Doesn't matter. Where's his copy of *The Joy of Sex*, he needs to start making liner notes for the eventual homosexual edition. It's 1994, for chrissakes. There should be a homosexual edition. They're going to have so much sex and it's going to be so fucking *joyful*, it's going to blow those limey heterosexuals right outta the water... this is what gets Daniel a Pulitzer, he just knows it. Or maybe a Nobel? He has never actually tried writing before, but the world will not be able to deny him this accomplishment and wait. Wait. Hang on just a sec.

“Daniel? You, uh – you look.”

The water in his stomach does not seem to be staying put. Daniel pinches his lips together and stares at the wall, determined to control the passage of his gullet like it's the fucking Panama Canal. He takes three steps down the hallway – his open bedroom beckoning; sex with

Johnny Lawrence awaits. And they are. It's gonna be so.

He takes another three steps, more quickly; he rushes into the bathroom and slams down on his knees before the toilet just in time.

The porcelain bowl looks like a crime scene after, but that's wine for you.

“No,” groans Daniel sometime much later, when he has thrown up another time and pissed twice and also the sun is shining in through the sides of his curtains?

“I didn't even say anything,” says Johnny but he shrugs and puts the glass of water down on the floor next to the bed. He keeps kneeling there, though, looking Daniel over with quiet interest.

Daniel wishes he wouldn't. This is so embarrassing. It's undignified. He has very strong opinions about which people are allowed to see one hungover, and none of those categories include Hot Headcase You Are Trying To Help.

He rolls onto his back and grimaces at the ceiling in defeat. But maybe it's not so bad? Johnny seeing him like this? Maybe it'll boost his self esteem to see someone so otherwise impressive and put-together in his daily life brought briefly low by as human a failing as wanting to have a good time on a Saturday night?

He rolls his head to the left to look at Johnny. “Do you find this comforting?” he croaks.

Johnny's face twists faintly in disbelief. “Why would I find it comforting? We were supposed to fuck last night but then you threw up a bunch and passed out.”

“You know, you're a little sex-obsessed,” says Daniel; Johnny's eyes bug out for some reason. “I mean, I'm just saying.”

He drinks the water and falls back asleep for another hour. When he wakes up, he drags himself out of bed and into a shower, and that makes him feel slightly more like a person and not a person-shaped

scribble of pain and regret.

Susan is already out in the living room. He trudges over and squeezes in behind her on the sofa, dropping a hand around her waist.

“You threw up and I didn't,” she mumbles dully, lifting the TV remote. “Ha ha. Loser.”

He shuffles the sofa cushion beneath his head so he can see the television. “My hangover would be like ten times worse if I hadn't, so who's the loser here? Hey – hey, let's watch this.”

“I am not,” she says flatly, stabbing the remote with even more zeal and flipping past PBS, “watching the McLaughlin Group on a hangover.”

“You don't want to admit you got the hots for Eleanor Clift, I just know it. There isn't a mean woman with short hair you don't go for.” And he only jokes because he loves her, he is sure she knows this.

“Anyone would look good opposite Buchanan.”

“Mm, you have a point.” He sighs and shuts his eyes, letting her choose whatever she is gong to choose. He considers the particularly nasal misery in her voice and asks past the darkness of his eyelids, “How are you doing, really?”

She doesn't answer at first, and he hears the television break out into a local cooking show. They're in the middle of making a low-fat lasagna, and if he had the energy or spirit he might start to spontaneously tear up. Why does Susan hurt him in such specific ways? Is it because *she* loves *him*?

“Hangover's a good distraction,” she says at last. “Feel so bad, it's taking most of my focus away from the mangled, half-digested upchuck remnants of my heart.”

He rubs her tummy. “That's good.”

Johnny comes through the door sometime not long after that, plastic bag swinging at his side. He is shirtless, chest shining with sweat; he ran again. It's sick, really, or would be if it didn't look so good on him.

Daniel grunts vaguely and sits up, rotating his head along his neck so he can nod at him. “Where you go?”

He lifts the bag; it's full of tapes. “Sunset Video over on Kester.”

Johnny has brought them a day's worth of action movies, like he thinks the best thing for a hangover is the sound of gunshots and exaggerated punches. Daniel says this to him and he just nods like, duh. Daniel gives up.

“Okay,” says Johnny, stationing himself between them and the television set and ignoring their complaints.

Daniel looks at the strong line of his legs, the man's pliable midsection, and he feels a distant sort of regret. He would, of course, never take advantage of his boarder, but this doesn't mean he can't look. He's only human.

Johnny hefts his stack of tapes. He lifts two, face out. “We got a John Woo double feature – *Hard Boiled* and *Hard Target.* Now, you might think you don't want to watch *Hard Boiled* because it's means reading, but listen: the main guy's name is Tequila, and at one point he literally shoots a bullet at another bullet? The pipe explodes, it's awesome. And the shootouts are basically like karate fights, except with guns.”

“Okay?” says Daniel.

“But then we got *Hard Target* – have you seen it already? No? Seriously? It's a little predictable in parts, but it's hard to say no to Van Damme.”

“It is?” says Susan.

He shuffles the tapes and lifts a third, extending it towards them emphatically. “And then we got *Bloodfist IV: Die Trying.* Which I think speaks for itself.”

“Bloodfist Four,” says Daniel. “But I haven't seen Bloodfists one through three. How will I follow the plot?”

“Oh, don't worry,” says Johnny, reassuring. “The first three have nothing to do with this one.”

Daniel opens his mouth; finds he has nothing to say; closes it again.

Susan shifts in place and cranes her neck to look up at him. She says

earnestly, “I really hope the sex is worth it.”

Chapter 21: It's Not Complicated

Johnny isn't very good at being patient. Patience generally requires a certain surety, a belief that what you're waiting for will eventually arrive. But he has always needed another person to provide him with that belief. He tries to make up for this flaw by believing twice as hard as the next person.

Anyway, he is pretty sure he is meant to suck Daniel LaRusso's cock.

Daniel basically promised him he'd get to the night before. He doesn't get to take that back, but Johnny suspects he is probably going to try to – so Johnny's playing it cool. Luring him into a false sense of security by letting him recover from his hangover and showing him movies that just so happen to include a lot of hot athletic men doing awesome stuff. No way he won't be half in the mood by the time they get through all of them. Johnny always is.

But they're kind of on a tight timetable here. Johnny can't stay up too late; he has to be at the dojo first thing the next morning. And something in him knows he has to take care of this before then. He can't start training without it. He doesn't know why. He just can't, or it will be very bad. He doesn't know what kind of bad. Just bad.

He can't mess this up again, he thinks. It might be his last chance.

Sometime in the early evening, Daniel groans and pulls himself out of the sofa. Johnny glances away from where Van Damme is taking out bad guys between abandoned Mardi Gras floats and watches him pad over to the kitchen. A few seconds later, the sound of the fridge opening and closing. Clattering. He's cooking. He's cooking during the final showdown of *Hard Target.* This guy is unbelievable.

Susan doesn't so much as twitch when Johnny gets up as well and abandons the movie. So at least someone is properly appreciative of Van Damme.

Daniel glances up from the counter when he walks into the kitchen. “Don't give me that look. I watched two and a half movies. If I don't cook something, none of us are gonna eat anything today.”

“It was almost over,” says Johnny, but he drops the subject in favor of curling over the half-wall dividing the kitchen and dining area. He puts his chin into his arms and watches his hands for a while. “What are we having?”

Daniel tosses his hair out of his eyes and continues slicing the red pepper. “Nothing fancy – burgers and a salad sound good?”

And he sounds like he's actually asking, so Johnny frees his mouth from his forearms enough to murmur *sure.* Daniel nods and keeps working.

“You given any thought to how you're going to spend your week?” asks Daniel after a few minutes.

Johnny's brow pinches. He pushes up onto his forearms and puts his weight forward, lifting himself idly off the floor. “Told you, I'm training.”

Daniel nods. “Right, right.”

“I mean it – first thing tomorrow, I'm out of the house and pounding concrete. Bet I get up before you do, even.”

Daniel bobs his head from side to side. “Well, that won't be hard, I'm working another late one tomorrow night. Have to try adjusting tonight.”

“You mean you're staying up late tonight?” asks Johnny, casual. And when Daniel's eyes move up, pinning him in place, he looks back unblinking.

“Yeah,” says Daniel slowly, like he's trying to work something out. “So maybe I should take the couch again, make sure I don't disturb you.”

“You won't disturb me,” says Johnny simply.

He shakes his head. “Oh, I don't know about that – I can forget myself sometimes. Haven't quite got used to not having the house to myself. Might be too loud for you.”

“I'm a heavy sleeper.” And when Daniel shakes his head, he adds, “Especially if I get fucked before bed.”

Daniel slices into the tip of his index finger. He curses and spins away from the counter, dashing for the sink. He hits the tap and sticks his

hand beneath the water.

Johnny is already moving. He grabs the roll of paper towel and unwinds a couple sheets. He steps up close to Daniel's back and looks over his shoulder at the thin trail of blood getting dragged away down the drain.

“Here,” he says, and he reaches past him to turn the faucet off before taking his wrist in hand. He can feel the stiffness of Daniel's body. He hopes he isn't reading him wrong when he nudges him into turning around.

He looks down at the cut, already welling up again and spilling scarlet down his hand. He brings the unprotesting hand up and takes the finger into his mouth. His eyes flick up and lock onto Daniel's and he sucks on the cut, trying to seal it with his tongue before bringing the wad of paper towel up to fold around the finger.

Daniel cocks his jaw and regards him levelly. He doesn't make any move to get out from Johnny caging him by the sink, though. He owns the space he occupies without even trying, and this is exactly what Johnny needs, why can't he see that?

“Look, it's not a good idea,” says Daniel, determined.

“Of course it is,” he says immediately. “You said so yourself last night – it'll be really hot.”

“That's beside the – you know, you shouldn't use a drunk man's words against him when he's sober. It's just not cool.”

“Are you saying you don't think it'd be hot?” asks Johnny, confused. He thinks Daniel is usually smarter than this. He pulls at his wrist a little and looks down at the small space between their bodies. What's the problem here? Daniel already brought Johnny home and put him in his bed and gave him his fingers and clothes and food.

“I'm *saying* ,” Daniel bites out, “you're going through a lot of changes in your life right now, and I don't think it's a good time to jump headfirst into a new relationship. Okay?”

But it's just fucking? thinks Johnny. He flattens his mouth a little and squints at him, frustrated.

“Look, us being attracted to each other is nothing new,” continues Daniel, and he's looking depressingly more sure of himself with every

passing second. He laughs a little bitterly and waves his free hand. “I mean, I think we both remember how this played out the first time around, right?”

“I think you're making this more complicated than it has to be,” he says.

His mouth drops open and his tongue skates along the edge of his teeth a moment before he commits to baring them. “Johnny, I'm not over-complicating anything. You think you can make things simple by barreling along without thinking or talking about anything, like if you ignore the choice it ceases to exist, but that's not how life works. Christ, *do* you remember senior year? You can't just move into a guy's house and bed at the drop of a hat and think—”

“So you don't want me in your bed?”

“I didn't say that!” he snaps, and his expression breaks; his shoulders fall. He covers his eyes with his free hand and takes a couple steadying breaths.

Johnny watches him, his own anger finally simmering up. “You know, you give off a lot of mixed signals – you always have, I remember that much. I'm hearing you talk a lot about what you think I *should* do or want but you don't say anything about what you want. And that's the only thing I've been asking, this whole time.”

Daniel stares up at him. Between the grim set of his mouth and the pallor of his hangover, he looks tight and unhappy. He's a completely different guy from the day before, the one who thought nothing of putting his hand on Johnny's knee and teasingly tried to get him to dance, the one who kissed Johnny's name into his mouth like he was remaking the meaning of it.

Johnny shakes his head and drops the man's injured hand in disgust. “In case it isn't obvious,” he says, “I *did* make a choice. I'm here. And just because my life's a mess, doesn't mean I don't know when I want something.”

He brushes past him, and Daniel grits his teeth but lets him go, let's him walk a few feet before saying:

"Wanting something isn't always a good enough reason."

Johnny doesn't look around, but his hands ball into fists. His eyes are hot and he hasn't felt this stupid in a while. Like, four days at least.

"I think I'd actually prefer it if you guys were fucking," Susan tells him as he passes through the living room, silent as a ghost going to haunt the bedroom for a while. "Listening to these conversations is going to stop being funny pretty soon. Going to give me a stress ulcer."

Chapter 22: Pushing and Pulling

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Supper is torture. Daniel puts together a beautiful bowl of fresh salad and a plate of perfectly grilled burgers with all the fixings a person could ask for on the side and he thumps them both down in the middle of the kitchen table like someone tossing half-eaten leftovers out the back of a restaurant into a dumpster.

Johnny slouches in his seat and chews through his burger, tasting very little. Maybe Daniel isn't even a good cook, maybe he's just pretty. Distracts people from the fact his food tastes like sawdust.

Susan puts her fork in her salad and spins it idly, looking between them a moment before directing her gaze ahead at the wall. “Divorce already?” she muses. She takes a couple bites and chews thoughtfully. She angles a narrow look to her right at Daniel. “What kind of alimony do you think you'll owe him? You were together, what, three days? Maybe you can settle things in mediation. I say low-ball him, see if he'll take ten bucks to go away.”

“That's not funny,” Daniel tells her.

Susan shrugs. “Divorced kids' humor. Guess you wouldn't get it.”

“You're *twenty-eight*.”

“And you think I should, what, grow up and not have an emotional reaction to my parents' marital problems?”

Johnny takes another massive bite of his burger and chews aggressively, ignoring them both. He's going to finish this burger in two-three bites, just watch. He can fit so much into his mouth at once, and he might as well, not like this skill is going to be used for anything else anytime soon.

“I'm just saying, it's not the same thing as if it was happening while you were still living there, okay?”

“And how would you know, Daniel? How would you know? Everyone in your family has the perfect little relationship—”

“Yeah, pretty easy for something to be perfect when one of them is *dead*—”

Johnny shoves the last of the burger into his mouth and stands from the table.

Daniel cuts himself off and looks up at him, brow lowering. “Where you going? You haven't had any of the salad.” His tone turns betrayed as Johnny walks away. “Hey!”

“You know,” says Susan behind him, tone turning sly and smug, “they say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, but I think with that one it's actually through his—”

“Don't.”

In the bedroom, he reaches beneath the bed frame to grip his gym bag and drag it out. He kneels beside the dresser and pulls open the drawer with his stuff, and he doesn't think about anything as he starts packing.

That's a lie; he thinks about where he's going to go. He can call a taxi, but he'll need to give some kind of address. He should just flip through the yellow pages, pick a hotel at random, at least for the night. Maybe he can crash at the dojo? He thinks about asking for a place to stay from Sensei, and his stomach turns cold. What is that, humiliation?

There is a light knock on the door and a second later Daniel slips inside. He looks at Johnny with his bag, and it's like his whole body slumps a couple inches down. Johnny is surprised the guy doesn't sink into the floor somehow.

“Aw, c'mon,” says Daniel, half-groaning like Johnny is being some kind of frutrating kid or something. He steps forward. “Don't do that. I said you could stay and I meant it.”

He crouches beside Johnny and tries to put a hand on the bag, but Johnny rips it away.

“I don't need your charity, man, okay? Just forget it. Jesus.”

“It's not charity, I want to help.”

“What's the difference?”

“What's the difference?” repeats Daniel. He throws a hand out, helpless. “What's the difference between you staying here now versus a couple hours ago?”

Johnny stares at him. “Orgasms.”

What an idiot. What a stupid, lying idiot. Acts like he wants to keep Johnny, like he belongs here, and then says shit like this. He continues stuffing socks into his bag; Daniel watches him with a darkening expression, but what does he care? It's not like it makes any *difference* anyway.

“Johnny. Johnny, man, stop.” And Daniel doesn't reach for the bag again; he bypasses it and grips his forearms instead. Johnny bites his tongue and sits back on his heels. He widens his eyes at him, an impatient *what?*

Daniel licks his bottom lip, gaze flickering through too many thoughts too quickly for him to catch.

“Okay,” he says carefully. “Clearly I've missed something here. Care to help me out? I mean, I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt that you weren't actually thinking in terms of paying me back or whatever through acts of oral service.” But then he leans forward to search Johnny's eyes like he's checking to be sure.

Johnny's expression twists. “Don't be stupid. I have actual money I can give you for rent.”

“That's not necessary,” says Daniel immediately and then he winces as Johnny says loudly into his face *jesus fucking christ.*

Johnny shakes his head and looks away. He's painfully aware of Daniel sitting there, waiting. He fights for a while, trying to make himself get the words out; all he ends up managing is a halting:

“The idea of staying here, and being told – every day? That you don't want me or don't want me *enough*, is. That's hell. Like, no. I won't do it. So just, just fuck off and leave me alone, okay—” and he tries to go back to packing but is stopped by Daniel leaning forward to kiss him.

He drags his hands up Johnny's arms and shoulders like he's memorizing the shape of him and then buries them in his hair, tilting Johnny's head to position him how he wants so he can deepen the

kiss.

“You want to know what I want?” he asks eventually, leaning back a few inches. He stops Johnny from chasing his mouth by firming the grip on the back of his neck, and that's just as good, actually.

Johnny should say something, probably. Like, *what?* But he's blinking slowly, still performing a leisurely mental backstroke along the current of Daniel's control. But then Daniel says:

“I want to take you out on some dates. Okay?”

And so then Johnny does say *what?* And he starts blinking a lot more quickly. Daniel repeats himself and it still doesn't make any sense.

“But – what's the point?” asks Johnny. He narrows his eyes and checks cautiously, “You realize you don't have to *woo* me, right? I've been trying to be up front about everything. I mean, how many times do I have to say I want to—”

“Yeah, yes,” says Daniel hastily, raising his hand. “I know. I got that part. That's – crystal clear. Message received.”

He is so lost. “So what the hell?”

“Hey, you asked me what I wanted. So – there. I guess I want to woo you,” he says, and he doesn't say the word like Johnny said it, like it's obviously ridiculous. He just says it. While maintaining steady eye contact. It's really embarrassing.

Johnny flushes and looks down at his open bag. He isn't sure what to do here. He suddenly feels uncomfortable in a way he never has around Daniel.

“Hey.” He rolls his eyes up to look at him through his lashes. Daniel worries at his lip, hesitant. “Do you – you remember, at the end of school, you left a book for me in the library?” And when Johnny shrugs and nods, he asks, “Why did you do that?”

He isn't sure what he's being accused of; Daniel is watching him closely, curiosity and something else in his eyes. He looks like he really wants an answer, though, so Johnny tries to summon one.

“I don't know,” he says, shifting a little on his knees. “I guess it felt weird, the way we left things. And you were always reading all the time, so it just felt like – I don't know.”

He barely remembers what he was thinking. Weirdly, he remembers the bookshop maybe best of all: he'd found one downtown, somewhere no one who ever knew him might be. Even with the anonymous surroundings, he still felt like he was pulling some kind of bank heist as he walked up to the counter to pay for the book. His heart never beat so fast in his life. Afterwards, it was like carrying around a grenade with a loose pin. He was so relieved to get rid of it, leave it in the library for Daniel.

“You didn't fight in the tournament, and we didn't have as many classes together that semester,” he says, remembering. “I didn't know what else there was. That would be a good excuse, I mean.”

“Excuse?” asks Daniel.

He shrugs. “To see you.”

And he doesn't understand the look on his face then, but he doesn't get long to puzzle over it, because Daniel shuffles so he's sitting crosslegged and pulls Johnny forward and down, dragging his head onto Daniel's lap. It would be a really promising position, except Daniel's not hard. He runs his hands through Johnny's hair, and fine. He figures he's cool with this.

“Well, okay, so – the good news is, a date is an excellent excuse to see me,” says Daniel and his voice is so obviously falsely bright, Johnny frowns and tries to twist around to get a look at him. The man's hands forestall him. More mixed signals. Whatever.

Johnny sets his cheek against the man's thigh and squints at the floorboards of the wall beneath the window. “If we're going on a date, does that mean we can fuck?” he asks at last.

“No. Dates first.”

“But will you at least sleep in the bed?”

Daniel hesitates. “...Yes, fine.”

“And I get to sleep in the bed too,” says Johnny, checking.

“Yes.”

“So we're both sleeping in the bed, but we're not fucking?”

“Johnny,” says Daniel, brushing his hair back from his temple. “Don't

push it.”

Chapter End Notes

story accompaniment

Chapter 23: Sleep Now

Johnny hears *don't push it* and tries to take it to heart, he does. This whole thing doesn't work if he shows he can't be trusted to follow direction, or if he tries to wriggle out of it somehow; nobody wants a lawyer reading fine print with this kind of thing, he figures.

It's just, it's hard.

He hasn't ever really slept with someone before, and getting into bed with the intention of doing so is a lot different than Daniel showing up in the middle of the night when he's already half asleep, or the man passing out cold on top of him like he had the night before. Suddenly Johnny questions everything; how close he is allowed to get, where he puts his arms and legs. Whether he is allowed to touch.

He wants to touch. He wants Daniel's skin against his own, anyway he can get it. It doesn't even have to be sex. He just doesn't know how to get it without sex – or how to get it without seeming like he's trying to, well, *get it*.

“You mind the light?” asks Daniel, book in hand and gesturing at the lamp on the bedside table.

Johnny shakes his head and follows him with his eyes as he gets into the bed and sits up with a pillow behind his back against the wall, another in his lap to prop the book on.

Daniel glances at him. “C'mere.”

And Johnny doesn't need to be told twice but he loves being told once. He slides across the crappy sheets and snugs up close to Daniel's side, pressing his nose into his bare midsection above the waistband of his pajama pants. His arm creeps up to loosely curl around the man's right thigh.

Daniel drops a hand onto his back and leaves it there, rubbing the relaxed muscles between his shoulder blades and only ever lifting the hand to turn a page every minute or so. Johnny listens to him breathe and flick the edges of his book's pages, and he tries to will himself to be drowsy. This is perfect. He should not push it. This is so much more than he had a week ago – than he's ever had, even. *Don't push it.*

He doesn't know how much time passes. The yellow glow of the bulb

on Daniel's other side isn't enough to bother his eyes beneath his closed lids, so that's not the problem. He tries stretching his body out long and hard and then retracting again, like he can fool it into being more tired than it is. It doesn't work.

He turns fully onto his front and digs his face beneath Daniel's back, moving his arm up to sling across his lap under the pillow. His foot inches over and he scrapes his big toe up the length of Daniel's sole.

Daniel twitches. “You okay? Is it the light? Should I go out to the living room?”

Johnny rolls onto his side and looks up at him through the muss of his hair. “Can I jerk off?” And when Daniel stills, tongue between his teeth and hands frozen over his book, he rushes to add, “I swear I'm not trying to push it, I won't – I won't touch you or anything.” He ducks his head and makes himself amend the request, “I'll go into the bathroom to do it, if you want.”

“Since when do you need permission to go masturbate over a toilet,” says Daniel.

Johnny just waits.

He wants to touch him so bad, he doesn't know how his fingers haven't clawed holes in the bed's fitted sheet yet. If he has to settle with touching himself, he's at least going to do it right, under the full light of the man's knowledge and approval. He's not pushing but Daniel can at least give him that, surely.

“Fine,” says Daniel finally, sounding a little harried. He waves a hand and makes a big show of returning to his book. “If you're that hard up – be my guest. Get your worries off your chest. Whatever.”

He startles a little at the immediacy with which Johnny gets onto his back and throws the blanket off his body. Daniel didn't actually specify he should go do this elsewhere, so – Johnny's not pushing it, he's just doing as he's been told.

And he's not pushing it either if, after dragging his boxers down and wrapping a hand around himself, he turns his head to press his face against Daniel's hip again. And if he matches his strokes with his breathing, mouth dropping open a little to gulp in more of the sense of Daniel, well, he's still not pushing it. Daniel could leave, after all. He'd already offered to go into the living room. If he stays, he must approve on some level. Johnny hopes he does.

He fists his cock and tightens the muscles in his arms and torso, pulls his knees up and braces his feet against the mattress like he's really fucking more than just his hand. He tosses his head back and fucks the idea of getting fucked. Part of him thinks if he does it right, he can make the image of it grow in Daniel's mind too, the way they always seemed to be of the same mind back when they used to fuck around. If Daniel likes what he sees, then maybe – if Johnny is just good enough, appealing enough, then they can—

The hand descends again, dragging his hair back from his sweat-prickling scalp. It doesn't pull but it tightens, tugging Johnny's eyes and attention up, up, up to Daniel, who is frowning?

Johnny's mouth drops open slightly, and his heels slide helplessly over the bed.

“Loosen your grip,” says Daniel. “You're going to hurt yourself. Not even using any lube.”

Relief and bliss descend so fast, he nearly comes, but his obedience beat the feelings – he has already released his cock. His hands skid damply down the crease of his thigh, across his abdomen. Every inch of his skin feels alight. He pushes his head back against Daniel's hand, but only a little. Not demanding, just – letting him know. He likes it. He'd like more, please.

“Jesus, Johnny.” He sounds distantly amazed. “You're really something, you know that?”

And Johnny's not pushing, but he'd like Daniel to tell him more about that, about what kind of something he is – tell him so he knows what's good and what to be, and he'll be the very best at it, whatever it is.

A thumb swipes over his forehead and Johnny cracks his eyes back open in time to see Daniel lean down. His own eyes are on Johnny's dark red cock, straining against the empty air.

“Okay, I want you to lick your hand,” he tells him softly. “Get yourself good and wet, now. Let's do this right.”

Thank you, thinks Johnny in relief. Oh, thank you.

“You've got a very pretty tongue, did you know that? That's right, get those fingers covered. That's good. Okay, now I want you to touch yourself again, but I want you go much lighter – focus on the head, the edge there, how it feels. Yes? That's very good, Johnny. Look at

that, you've already improved so much."

He scratches Johnny's scalp with his fingernails, and no one has touched him like this in years, not unless you count the hairdresser when she washes his hair for a too-short time every few months, and that always feels really good but this is better, it's so much better.

"So," says Daniel once Johnny is lying beside him, limp and spent. He is gentle in disentangling his fingers from Johnny's hair. He sounds like he's already halfway back to his book. "Think you can sleep now?"

But Johnny already is.

Chapter 24: ...

The alarm comes too quick, and he reacts automatically, snapping awake and turning swiftly – but he has forgotten he is not alone in the bed. He nearly elbows Daniel in the face while reaching to shut off the alarm.

He silences it, attention close on the other man. It had only been maybe two seconds of noise, but it was enough to wake Johnny; Daniel only stirs faintly. He thickly mumbles something like *god, you weren't kidding?* and goes back to sleep.

Johnny stays where he is for a moment longer, arrested in the air above him. He looks at Daniel: the soft slackness of his mouth and still line of his dark lashes, his head half turned towards the dented pillow where Johnny's head had recently been.

Johnny retreats down the mattress, so he can slide off the bed without disturbing him. He doesn't know why he let Daniel take the outside the night before. He hadn't been thinking.

He is quiet in pulling out fresh workout clothes. When he bends to pull on his socks, his hair falls forward over his eyes. No good. He thinks about this for a moment and turns to the closet, where he'd shoved the old box from his apartment.

He drags the large box out and unfolds the dust-laden cardboard tabs. Even though he knew what it contained, he is still unprepared for the sight of the framed photo sitting on top of everything. It makes him pause for half a second, memory catching – the kid in it looks like someone else, a stranger or maybe a distant cousin, someone he might have known once when he was younger but whose name he can barely remember. The woman looks even less real. A person he made up in a dream. Her smile is identical to the fake one he wore every day to work.

He shoves his hand beneath the frame, digging quickly past other photos and crumpled papers, a trophy, folded shirts and other shit. His hands find an edge of the crumpled length of cloth, and he pulls.

The black headband emerges from the jumbled box like a magician's handkerchief: one minute, nothing; and then.

Johnny drags it through his hand a couple times to get the lint and

dust off and then he presses the flat of the band over his forehead and wraps it backwards around his head. His fingers move deftly like it has been only a matter of days and not years. He feels the loose ends fall against his back and breathes out something like relief.

He shoves the rest of the box back into the depths of Daniel's closet and slides the door again, and like always, it's as simple as that.

For his run, he chooses *Metallica*. He thinks he should be able to get to the dojo before the last somber strums of Nothing Else Matters.

Sensei wants him conditioning every day; Sensei thinks he needs to put on more muscle, so his strikes have more power behind them. These fights aren't *no contact* like when he was younger. He needs to be able to knock out his opponent or drive him to a point of complete, undeniable submission. Can he do that? Johnny can.

The world makes sense when it's just bodies in motion, when the only thing Johnny has to take into account and react to is the fighter opposite trying to put him down. How satisfying it is to say *no;* how easy it can be on the mat, to say *not this time, not ever – not for you.*

Sensei runs him through an old, familiar series of blocks and strikes. The traffic picks up outside. So does the heat.

“What happened to the air conditioning?” asks Johnny, on a five minute water break.

“Why?” asks Sensei, head tilting. “Are you uncomfortable?”

And of course Johnny isn't, at least not in anyway he needs to acknowledge or admit. Discomfort is weakness, which can be exploited by the enemy.

The breaks are odder without other students around. It's a lot like the months after graduation, when Johnny trained with Sensei alone for long stretches of time.

He remembers that time with the same warm, cloistering haze of a summer drinking binge. That singular focus: the hard, expectant gaze running over his body. When Johnny wasn't moving, he felt the attention like a hand on the back of his neck. It became hard in those silent moments to not think of John Kreese as a man.

But that's the other thing Johnny remembers about that summer: the endless waiting. But he'd gotten what he wanted. He was untouchable and the whole world sensed it.

Johnny breathes easier when they go back to training.

“I tried to telephone you over the weekend, to verify your availability for an upcoming fight,” says Sensei a couple hours later, when Johnny is sitting down on the mat, stretching out an ache in his hamstring. He paces around him slowly. Johnny pulls his leg towards the ceiling and follows him with his eyes. “You didn't pick up, obviously. But neither did your answering machine.”

“Oh,” says Johnny, realizing. “Right – I'm sorry. I'm actually in the middle of moving. Staying at a friend's house at the moment.”

Sensei stops at the end of his legs, and Johnny feels his eyes on him, tries not to do anything too obvious like pull his leg back further, display what his body can do.

“I'll need his number, then. So I can reach you if I need to.” And I'll need to, goes the unspoken end.

Johnny swipes his tongue of his bottom lip. “Yeah, I'll – I'll get you the number.”

“You're staying with a friend and don't know his number?” asks Sensei.

Johnny thinks quickly. It's unlikely Sensei remembers Daniel. He only met him the one time, and outside a moment of anger and disapproval about how the tournament bet went down back then, he has never indicated he even remembers his existence. And why would he? Daniel is nobody.

“Yeah, I don't – I don't really have a head for that kind of thing, sorry,” he says, and he switches legs, lowering his right and slowly pulling his left up and back until he feels the burn in his thigh muscle.

“Doesn't matter,” says Sensei after a second. He resumes pacing and starts to tell Johnny about the fight he might join, if he's ready, and Johnny commits to being ready. He has nothing else he needs to focus on except this.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He could tell Lawrence was exhausted from the strength training. He would need to get the boy to a weight room this week. He was too slim for his shoulders, build more swimmer than fighter. If John put him in a ring right now, their opponents might laugh and call him pretty. Underestimation can be useful, but he won't abide being laughed at. Not by the opponents he has in mind for them.

“Protein and carbs,” he told him. “No dairy, no sugar. Get eight hours of sleep every night. Drink nothing but water.”

“Yes, Sensei.”

He paused, narrowly watching the faint tremor in the hands at the end of those overworked arms. “You ran here.” Lawrence nodded. “I appreciate the commitment to your cardio, but you're not some metrosexual office worker running off the lunchtime calories anymore. You need to apply that energy someplace else – next time, drive.”

He blinked hard but nodded again. His cheeks stained pink from more than the training.

“I'll drop you home,” said John.

This elicited a faint stirring. “I can call a taxi—” John looked at him. The boy stopped talking. His eyes shifted off-center, went still and opaque. A second later he thanked him.

John nodded and told him to wait outside as he locked up. He turned and went back into his office to grab his keys and got caught looking into the trash bin again, where the torn and smashed flower bouquet from the morning was still waiting. Time to get this over with.

He set his teeth. He leaned backwards to check that Lawrence had left and then shut the door of the office just to be safe.

The line only rang once before it was picked up. The rush of air in the background told him Terry was outside somewhere, or maybe driving.

“John,” he said, pleased. Somehow he always knew when it was him

calling. John used to think that meant something. Like he was always waiting, or perhaps that attuned to him.

“If you think I'd be bothered by something like a bunch of flowers, you never really knew me,” said John.

“Yes, I suppose you're right,” said Terry. “You certainly don't sound bothered at all.”

His grip went tight on the plastic casing of the phone, and he nearly slammed it down on the desk. He could feel, could *see*, how the head might snap off, how the edge of the desk would chip. It would be so satisfying, but also telling. So instead of doing this, he put his head back and breathed hard and silent through his nose.

A regretful sigh in his ear. “Didn't you like them? My florist assured me they communicated fidelity, patience, and truth.”

“Fuck your truth,” he said.

Terry hummed. The wind blew harder a moment – he was in traffic, then. Turning, maybe.

“I actually called to make you an offer,” said John, recapturing control of the conversation.

“Well, you know how much I love it when you deign to give me your attention and time, John.”

His mouth curled. He knew it. So, the bitch was still sulking. He said, “Why don't we settle this right, like men. Enough of this lawyer shit.”

“Feeling outclassed?” Terry asked cheerfully. “The firm I employ has a partner and five associates dedicated to just me. They had Denmark begging for mercy last year. What do you suppose they will do to you and your one little dojo?”

His jaw twinged. He thought again about the phone, the desk, the relieving savagery of destroying all the trappings of this place.

“Your lawyers can beat me,” he agreed instead, and his voice came out perfectly easy, because he remembered who he was talking to – who, and what. “But I think we both know that's not going to be satisfying for you. It isn't real. Just like your whole life isn't real. Not real like the jungle was real. You have a bunch of suits waiting on your every word, but the only ear that matters to you is mine. That's

what this is all about. This... tantrum."

Terry said nothing, and John finally smiled.

"This is how it's going to go instead," he said. "You'll put forward whatever fighters you think you have found for this silly Ultimate Fighting Championship. My fighter will beat them. And then we can forget about this whole thing and go back to the way things were. Cobra Kai stays with me."

"Oh, John."

He went stiff again at the unexpected hint of pity in his voice.

"You're really not much of a deal-maker, are you," he said thoughtfully. "It's like talking to Donald Trump, this is almost embarrassing. You're all bluster and no thought – think, John. What possible motivation do I have to make any kind of deal with you about this? What are you *offering* me?"

"Me," he made himself say, and he felt almost sick with it. Like he might throw up. "I'm offering you – me. Myself."

Terry was silent a moment. And then quietly: "You nearly broke my wrist the last time I tried to put a finger in you."

He said harshly, "You want to be top dog, Terry, this is your chance to prove you can do it. Fuck the lawyers. Let's settle this the old way, our way. It's better like this, and you know it."

And of course at the end of the day, John was right. Terry could swan about with his glittering superiority and carefree words, but it was all a show he put on for the rest of the world. The one person who saw through it was John. And maybe he didn't negotiate very well, but what he offered was at least honest and simple and real.

Terry took the deal.

Chapter End Notes

story accompaniment

Chapter 26: New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Johnny is dropped home with instructions to report to a different address the following afternoon for weight training. Sensei does not comment on the shitty house or the shitty neighborhood, or the absence of any sign of a car Johnny might drive. Johnny is relieved, he thinks.

He hops the fence into the backyard and almost feels like whistling as he lets himself into the house.

This time last week, he was in a meeting in the big conference room, sitting straight-but-not-too-straight and trying to pay attention to whatever was being said, or at least look like he was paying attention. His shoulders and thighs ached with tension from holding himself still in the chair, because he'd learned people find it distracting when you move around too much (*do you need to go to the bathroom, John* or *what are you, a hyperactive toddler)*. And there was still four hours left to the day before he could drive home and pour himself a large enough drink to empty himself out for the evening, because the only way to bear the thought of the rest of the week was to not be there for it.

But right now his body is tired and sore but content. His mind is quiet. There is six hours of light left in the day and he has this house to himself, but not forever.

He takes a long hot shower and steals some of Susan's shampoo and conditioner because Daniel uses a two-in-one, and he doesn't think he likes it, actually; Daniel's hair reacts differently to it than his, he thinks.

He leans his forehead against the fogging tile for long minutes, holding his stiff cock as he thinks about the day and the night before – but not stroking it because he has decided it's better to wait for the next time Daniel tells him he can. Johnny can be patient. It's like waiting for another fighter to approach across the mat. You strike first after seeing how they move.

After the shower, he puts on a pair of fresh boxers and wanders back

out to the living room. He switches on Daniel's radio.

He makes himself a sandwich, skipping the condiments and cheese automatically. He gets a little distracted halfway through eating by the cluttered spice rack on the counter and starts absently turning the little jars all around so their labels are facing out. This progresses to straightening them so they form a smooth, uniform line like little spice soldiers in a spice company. But then he starts swapping them around so all the spice soldiers are in the right squads – the herbs with the other herbs, the reddish powders with other reddish powders. Then he rethinks this strategy: a good squad should have a mix of skill sets after all. So he swaps them around again, until the company is better balanced.

By the time he is through with his sandwich the rack is a lot better. He looks curiously around the kitchen for what else he could help organize.

Susan gets home at half-past seven, and she is already bitching even before she's fully closed the front door.

He looks over the back of the sofa at her, and she keeps bitching as she takes off her shoes and throws her purse over the rack by the door; keeps bitching as she walks down the hallway; keeps bitching as she changes out of her work clothes, shouting from her room. Her boss is a bitch, is Johnny's general takeaway.

She joins him on the sofa, collapsing on the opposite end, and finally stops bitching.

They watch the television for a minute.

“So you're an NBC man,” she says eventually.

Brokaw is better looking than Jennings. And he's felt weird about CBS since the thing a few years ago. But sure, maybe he could be an NBC man.

Susan slowly takes up more and more of the sofa, and when he tries shoving her feet away from his thigh, she kicks him. He clings to his armrest, stubbornly refusing to move to the armchair, which he thinks of as Daniel's.

At one point, she groans loudly. He looks over and she says, voice dead, “I told Daniel I'd do the grocery shopping tonight.”

“So go do the grocery shopping,” he says, thinking: then I can have the house to myself again.

She narrows her eyes. “I don't want to? I already changed out of my clothes.”

He thinks about this. “I could do the grocery shopping.”

“Uh, *no.* You couldn't – hey, I'm not even trying to insult you here. That man is impossible. He says he wants turkey for the week's cold cuts but of course you bring home the wrong type of turkey, and then he tells you it's not even from the right deli. I swore I would never do the shopping again after last time, but then he started taking these stupid swing shifts,” this last part said as if Daniel had taken a night shift specifically to mess with her.

“But you told him you were going to buy food,” says Johnny, thinking about the empty shelves in the fridge. “So you should go buy food.” It's very simple. Maybe she doesn't understand how this works? “You're staying at his place, he should have food.”

She stares at him; he stares blankly back.

“So it's come to this,” she says distantly. “I'm being lectured on how to treat Daniel, by Johnny Lawrence of all people. I thought rock bottom would involve more hard drugs.”

He rolls his eyes. “Give me the list. I'll do it right.” He has the rest of the evening to get it right, he figures.

“No, trust me – you really, really won't.” She throws her head back against the armrest and sighs at the ceiling before pushing herself upright, swinging her invading legs off the sofa. “Alright. Fine. Let's go.”

He blinks. “You want me to come?”

“Think of it like job training.” She waves a hand at him. “Plus, you can carry everything.”

This means they both have to put on clothes again. That part, he'll admit, is kind of a drag.

Susan drives a yellow Saab 900 hatchback and it reeks of cigarette smoke. Johnny wrinkles his nose at the ash-flecked ashtray at the bottom of the the center console.

“I didn't know you smoked,” he says.

“Only when I'm driving,” she says tersely. “The drive to work in the morning is a two cigarette commute, three if the traffic's bad.”

“What about the drive home?”

She pauses, hand at the ignition. “I don't need to smoke on the drive home,” she says, nonplussed. “I'm going home.”

And he finds this makes sense, actually.

At the grocery store, Susan slumps forward over the handles of the grocery cart like someone performing back-breaking manual labor and directs him around the shelves. Mostly it's a lot of *no* and *yes, that one, no the big one.*

“You know, he didn't used to be this picky,” she tells him. “It started getting worse when he got the job at the garage and bought the house. It was like – one day he's eating beans and rice, and then I go to Europe for the summer and when I get back he's got opinions about vinegar.” She shakes her head. “You think you know a person.”

Johnny squints down at the bottle of balsamic vinegar in his hand; he had to pass over two other types before it was judged as acceptable. He doesn't know the difference and can't really summon an interest in discovering one. Should he become a person who has opinions about vinegar?

No, he decides after a moment. He sets the bottle down in the cart.

“This is a lot of stuff,” he says after a while. He is pretty sure what's in the cart right now is more food than he's ever kept in his old kitchen at one time.

“Why do you think I dragged you along?” she asks, not looking away from her list.

“I used to buy a lot of TV dinners,” he says. “TV dinners and eggs and bread.” He thinks about it. “Milk, I guess. Not whole milk though.

That stuff's not healthy. One percent."

"Fascinating," says Susan, but he doesn't think she means it.

He shrugs and wanders away to do some shopping for his training diet, since they're already there.

He picks a box of PowerBars for himself, and grabs a second box of eggs for the cart. He wonders if he should do the raw egg thing from *Rocky*. He grabs a third box of eggs.

"How much meat is on that list?" he asks when he returns with his four dozen eggs and box of PowerBars and also a bottle of red wine that was on sale that maybe Daniel might like; if he drinks enough of it, maybe he'll get tipsy and handsy again. Drinking wine at home is basically like a date, or could be, if you call it one.

Susan flips the list around and holds it up to his face; Johnny scans it.

"That's not enough meat," he says after a moment.

"Sometimes I swear you're giving me these openings on purpose," she tells him.

Once home with their six sacks of groceries, neither of them have the energy to cook dinner, so they order delivery. Johnny ends up with a carton of chicken and broccoli he doesn't really like, but he's following Sensei's orders and that helps him ignore it a little.

They eat in front of the TV, picking through their white cartons as *Murphy Brown* turns into *Love & War* which bleeds into *Northern Exposure.*

"Ever think you might want to live in Alaska?" asks Susan.

"Fuck no," says Johnny, who is relieved to have a strong opinion about something at last. "Think about it: all the beaches are probably frozen. No surfers. No beach volleyball. Everyone probably wearing puffy fishing vests. And no one's hot."

"Maggie O'Connell," says Susan, "is hot."

Johnny looks at the TV, considering the tomboyish pilot. If you squint, she could be a very pretty man.

“Yeah, I guess,” he says, grudging.

He doesn't fully awaken when Daniel gets in sometime in the early morning – just enough to shift back a few inches to let the other man onto the bed. He doesn't even open his eyes.

The mattress dips slightly with the extra weight.

His body responds automatically, like this is something it has always had, always known to do: he reaches out. His hand cups a hip bone like they were factory-designed to fit together. His lips land on a bony shoulder. He breathes in deep through his nose and sinks into him.

A gusty sigh comes from the other pillow. “And here I was all ready to say something about what the hell you did to my kitchen. But you make it kind of hard, man.”

What did Johnny do to his kitchen? Does he mean the organizing? Before he can wake up more and ask, though, Daniel turns onto his side, prodding him to do the same for some reason, and then – and then—

An arm curls around his waist. Knees tuck behind the back of his own. A narrow chest presses up against his shoulder blades.

“What,” he starts to say, voice raspy from sleep, but Daniel makes a sound to quiet him. He presses a kiss to the back of his neck and Johnny freezes.

“Tomorrow,” says Daniel, and the sleepy blurring of his voice makes it sound like a promise.

Chapter End Notes

"the cbs thing a few years ago"

Chapter 27: Breakfast of Champions

When Johnny's alarm goes off at ten the next morning, Daniel insists on getting up too. Johnny decides to interpret this as him being a stubborn idiot who thinks he doesn't need sleep. He ignores the fact that when he'd woken, he found himself already rubbing up against Daniel: cock hot and insistent against his hip, leg slung over his thigh. The stiffness in Daniel's body telegraphing that he was awake as well but not reaching back.

He doesn't ask if he can jerk off then, because he doesn't know if Daniel is a morning sex kind of person. And anyway, the moment he turns the alarm off, Daniel rolls off the bed and walks quickly from the room. So there's also that.

Johnny should probably just take care of himself in the bathroom, but he is determined to stick it out. Even if that means not jerking off for two days in a row, because Daniel is working another late shift that night. Discipline would be meaningless if it was easy.

When he walks into the kitchen, Daniel is standing in the middle of it, looking around with distinct displeasure as the coffeemaker burbles away.

“So, I see you were busy in here yesterday,” he says to Johnny, who looks at him warily from the corner of his eyes as he slides past him towards the fridge.

How many eggs did Rocky do? Four? Johnny turns from the fridge with his eggs held against his chest; Daniel is still staring at him expectantly.

“What?” he asks.

Daniel slumps forward onto the counter in front of the coffeemaker and rubs his face tiredly. “Never mind. Just – look, I appreciate... whatever it was you were trying to do, okay, but in the future? Don't rearrange my kitchen. I know where everything is, I like it the way I had it. Okay? Just don't – don't touch any of it.”

Johnny shrugs. “Okay.”

He reaches into a cupboard for the tallest glass he can find. He sets it down and carefully cracks the eggs into it.

Daniel pours himself a cup of coffee, glancing at him curiously: once, twice. Confusion followed by incredulity and then horror. He is at Johnny's side in the next second.

"*No*," he says.

"What?" says Johnny, confused and distracted.

"Please tell me you're not doing the Rocky thing," says Daniel.

"Okay," says Johnny, "I won't."

They both look down at the glass. He picks it up, gives it a vague shake. This is a mistake. The four yolks bob about, knocking dully into one another. Gleaming sickly. Eight fluid ounces of viscous goo.

"You don't have to do this," says Daniel urgently. He actually tugs on Johnny's wrist, which is really distracting. Also distracting: the movement of his bare arms and the faint puffiness of his brown nipples. "Eggs are one of nature's miracle foods. There are a million ways to cook an egg. Please, let me cook those – it'll only take a couple minutes to scramble them."

"This is healthier," says Johnny.

"How?" demands Daniel.

"I don't know – there's no extra fat from the frying." And he jumps slightly because Daniel reaches out and pinches his side. "Jesus, *what*."

"I don't think you have to worry about a minuscule amount of cooking fat, you lunatic – oh, no, *c'mon,*" he says as Johnny shakes his head and retreats around the counter to sit at the table with his breakfast. "Look, what about poaching? Soft-poached eggs, they're practically still raw? Put them over a piece toast, a couple turns of the pepper grinder, and little sprinkling of salt. You won't believe how good that can be."

"It's not supposed to be *good*," Johnny tells him, and the other man looks more offended by this statement than he had by his stupid spice rack.

Daniel collects his coffee and sits down opposite him at the table. Johnny shuffles on his chair, knocking his knees from side to side and trying to work up the nerve to down the eggs. He turns the glass in his

fidgeting, and this, too, is a mistake. They're just so thick.

“You know,” he says, aiming for distraction or maybe inspiration. “Sugar Ray Robinson used to drink beef blood in front of his opponents.”

“But he didn't have to do that,” says Daniel flatly. “So completely unnecessary – I mean, what about blood sausage? Or, you know, there are plenty of puddings and sauces that incorporate blood.”

Johnny stares at him, waiting for him to show some kind of sign that he knows he has said something ridiculous. Daniel only sips his coffee and glares some more at the eggs.

“I don't think pudding's very intimidating,” he says at last.

Fingers flick out from the mug handle, dismissive. “Being intimidating is overrated.”

He folds his lips together and nods seriously. “I understand why you want to believe that.”

Daniel pauses in lifting his mug, expression going suspicious. Johnny widens his eyes and tries not to smirk, but it's hard – the man is still wearing plaid pajamas bottoms. Johnny is pretty sure he could pick him up and throw him the length of the room, and he might even do it to prove the point except once he's picked him up he'll probably immediately discover better things to do with him. But Daniel hasn't given him permission, so.

He returns his attention quickly to the glass of raw eggs. Okay.

Daniel's expression crinkles in delicate disgust as Johnny wraps a hand around the glass and lifts it. There is a look of unwilling fascination in his eyes as he watches the glass travel up.

Johnny can chug a half-pint of vodka in one go, and he once deep-throated a cock that was at least seven inches long. It's all about relaxing the throat and controlling one's baser reflexes. This is nothing.

“It's not too late,” says Daniel. “I could still use those to make something else. I haven't tried souffles in a while. They wouldn't be going to waste.”

This seals the deal. Souffles. Even the word sounds really gay.

Johnny tips the glass against his open mouth, ignoring the cold, slick slide against his tongue and teeth. His throat works, and then it threatens to lock up but he refuses to let it.

He sets the glass down again on the table and takes a deep breath, like someone surfacing from deep underwater.

Daniel is frozen across the table, looking ill. “I should go back to bed,” he says to himself.

“Yeah, you should,” says Johnny. “Why'd you even get up in the first place?”

But Daniel just shakes his head and sighs.

Chapter 28: No More Waiting

A couple days pass and Johnny isn't given permission to jerk off, which would really fuck with his sleep if he wasn't so tired at the end of every day. But he starts to think he might need to ask again. Maybe Daniel's forgot, or maybe he hasn't realized. It's like Johnny's the stovetop he left on and he hasn't been back to turn him off. He might burn the house down, and it'll be Daniel's fault. People will probably still blame his wiring.

Or maybe this is all part of Daniel's weird plan. Maybe he's trying to wear Johnny down so he'll be desperate and beg to go out on the stupid date: anything, anything, so long Daniel will touch him at the end of it. Well, this only proves how short-sighted the man can be; if he tries to end this "date" with a gentlemanly peck on the cheek, Johnny is going to suck him off right there on the front step.

Okay, he won't. But he thinks about it very hard Thursday morning while shoveling a plate full of poached eggs into his mouth.

Daniel eventually notices his fixed look. He turns a page in his newspaper and glances up at him. "Something wrong?"

Johnny wonders how he would react if he slid off this chair and crawled across the room to him, grasped his ankles beneath his pajama pants and worked his way up his body like Daniel was a climbing wall. Surely Daniel wouldn't shove him away; Johnny would be working without a carabiner or safety line, after all. He might fall.

"Nope," he says.

He finishes eating and carries his plate over to the sink to wash it, which is something he has learned Daniel appreciates, not that he has any proper way of showing it beyond continuing to cook for him.

Johnny narrows his eyes out the window above the sink and swipes a cloth over the plate robotically.

Maybe Daniel's actually a monk, maybe that's what that old guy taught him. Maybe he's Buddhist and Buddhist monks don't have sex, do they? Except he acted like he did on Saturday night. He even said as much. He said he wanted anything and everything, but all he's acted like he wants since then is *nothing,* and it just doesn't make any sense. Unless he's a Buddhist monk now and Johnny is tempting him

to break his vows or whatever. Or maybe this is actually a Catholic thing? Or both? Maybe he's a Catholic Buddhist, and he thinks the world will come grinding to a halt if he lets someone touch his cock. What a waste. Religion is such a mistake.

“Oh, here, do you mind washing mine?” asks Daniel behind him, and an arm extends past him with a dirty plate and mug. “I'm running a little late and—”

Johnny grabs the wrist with one hand before it can retract. He carefully takes the dishes and sets them down before pulling and turning. He crowds Daniel against the sink.

“Right.” Daniel's eyes move over him, already dark as Johnny tips his head down, waiting and waiting and *waiting*. “Okay.”

Johnny's whole body comes to attention. “Okay?”

“No, I mean,” and Daniel laughs slightly and takes a quick breath, tongue swiping his lip. Johnny watches from inches away, practically able to taste him. His grip on the edge of the sink on either side of Daniel tightens: waiting and waiting and *waiting*—

“It's Thursday,” says Daniel, who doesn't seem to be aware how close he is to being sucked off within an inch of his life, “which means I'm not on the graveyard shift – how about I take you out, like I said I would? Tonight. We'll get dinner someplace. Sound good?”

“Dinner,” says Johnny, thinking about spending an hour or two in some restaurant, trying to pretend he isn't rock hard beneath the table cloth. What kind of sick fuck would want to do such a thing? Maybe this is a kinky thing? Maybe he's going to get Johnny really going and then take him back into the restroom to jerk him off in one of the stalls. That might not be so bad.

Daniel smiles a little. His eyes drop to observe the state of Johnny's body and he pauses before flowing forward. His hand comes up to hold Johnny's hip, groin millimeters from providing any relief to the heavy ache in Johnny's cock. He rises up onto his toes and tilts his head to put mouth to ear.

“You should probably take care of that beforehand, though,” he says quietly, the words a delicate puff of air against the side of Johnny's heated face. He squeezes his hip lightly. “Don't want you all distracted and suffering before we even get the appetizer, after all.”

Johnny's hands fall limply to his sides and Daniel slips out from beneath him and away.

So he's got his permission. But somehow the frustration doesn't go away.

And he is so grateful for his training session that day, because it means he doesn't have to think about that night or the past, what they'll do and what they have done before. He just needs to focus on what is in front of him and this means: a kick, a punch, bodies telegraphing force that must be met, matched, and mastered.

He spars with two men at once in the gym Sensei has chosen for his training, and when he bests them both Sensei tells him *very good, Mr. Lawrence*.

It steadies him. He remembers he can wait as long as he must to get what he wants, because there is control in that.

After training, he and his empty gym bag take a taxi to the nearest shopping mall so he can grab something to wear that night. He still needs to buy actual normal clothes, but he hasn't been able to muster any enthusiasm for the errand. But this is a pretty simple mission with a straightforward goal: he needs to look hot. Easy.

Except no, not easy, it turns out. He wanders the department store for twenty minutes until the circle racks of clothes seem to start performing choreographed spins around him. All he has in hand is a pair of dark trouser socks. He feels stupid and lost.

He knows what John Lawrence would wear, is the thing. He has been on a couple dates over the years, with a girl from the office he couldn't duck or someone one of the guys knew. He made small talk over drinks and reached out to tuck curls behind ears, made like he was coolly interested if the woman wanted to try hard enough. And sometimes she would and he'd have to deal with that too. John Lawrence liked dark suits with white shirts, open collars to show he could relax; cufflinks to show he had the money to do it. He was handsome and unobtainable.

“Sir, can I help you find something?” asks someone, and he turns in place, looking around at the saleswoman, a very put-together middle-aged brunette.

Yes, please for the love of god.

“Uh, no,” he says, lifting the socks in his hand like he's already got what he came for. “No, I'm good. Thanks.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind,” she says, with a look that suggests she can tell he is full of shit but is too much of a professional to imply it.

The other problem is, Daniel didn't say what kind of place they were going to. This is so stupid, he thinks again. What is he even getting worked up about. It's not like he has to impress the guy.

This isn't a real date, it's a power move. Daniel thinks he needs to treat Johnny like some kind of woman before he gets into his pants. Would really serve the guy right if Johnny shows up in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

His thoughts slow. He stops pacing and looks around the department again, eyes skimming indifferently over the tops of racks full of buttondowns and slacks. He locates an ocean of denim blue across the aisle and starts heading for it.

He's feeling a lot better when the taxi drops him back at the house. He's got a duffle bag full of clothes and he's not too wiped from training; he is ready for absolutely anything.

He walks across the front lawn to the side of the house and tosses his duffle over the fence before performing his now well-practiced run-and-jump. He doesn't stumble on the landing, which he's pretty smug about. He bends to grab his bag and rounds the corner of the house—

Instinct makes him duck. He drops the bag and rolls a few feet before springing back to his feet, his hands already up.

There's a burglar at Daniel's house.

The guy doesn't give him any time to recover or even shout; he launches himself at Johnny, fists flying and – and he knows karate? Finally. Johnny knew this had to happen some day. He's even fantasized about it.

He blocks two blows before taking a knee to his gut, which is more

than his sparring partners had managed to land earlier. The unexpected pain shakes him loose out of his head. He stumbles back against the fence.

His chest heaves and he stares at the intruder. He's young and Asian, wearing a sharp suit. And he knows karate. A guy who knows karate, breaking into Daniel's house? It can't be a coincidence. He must be here to mess with Daniel.

“So white boy knows some karate, eh?” says the guy, and he's smirking as he strips off first his suit jacket, and then his shirt and – he's really ripped, actually. Like, jesus. Alright. “I knew this moment would one day arrive,” he says with rich satisfaction, setting his arms into position. “And finally, it is here.”

Johnny straightens up along the fence, feet shifting into ready position. He brings his fists up to protect his face and bares his teeth in a hard smile of his own. They both breathe on the moment.

Then Johnny beckons with two fingers. “Alright asshole, let's see what you got. C'mon!”

A second later, the guy's foot shatters the fence board where his head had just been.

Chapter 29: ...

Chapter Summary

story accompaniment

He is on his knees in the dirt, trying to twist over the intruder and get him in a proper headlock. The guy breaks his hold and throws Johnny over his shoulder. He goes rolling into the trench Daniel had dug for his lavender bushes.

He pops back up, shaking his hair out of his eyes, soil flying everywhere. He tenses to launch himself at the guy again, but is stopped by frantic shouting from the house.

Shockingly, the guy actually pauses as well, eyes flicking to their corners. Johnny looks over. Neither of them drop their hands: always be ready to strike.

“What the *fuck* is happening out here?”

Johnny isn't sure he's ever heard Daniel's voice go quite this high before. Maybe he's scared of this guy. He should be; he could probably snap Daniel in half. Except Daniel doesn't look scared, he looks appalled – and as he runs up, he's not even looking at the intruder, he's staring around at the backyard, which – okay, yeah. They've kind of destroyed.

“What,” says Daniel weakly, turning in place. “I mean. Why – *how*?”

“This guy broke in,” says Johnny, and his words overlap with the intruder's, accusing him of the same thing. Johnny narrows his eyes. “Excuse me, man? I *live* here.”

“Yes, that is why you jump the fence,” he says, contemptuous. He waves a hand slightly but still doesn't drop it from being ready to punch. “If you live here, where's your key? *I* have a key,” he adds, and Johnny looks at Daniel in outrage.

But Daniel is preoccupied with his yard. He has cupped the back of his own neck, and his mouth is sort of sagging open.

“You broke my kitchen window,” he says dumbly.

“I'll pay for that,” says Johnny. It was his foot that did the damage,

after all.

“I threw this boy into the window,” says the guy. “I will pay for it.”

He can't take anymore of this. “Who the fuck is this guy?” shouts Johnny, dropping out of ready position just so he can point. “Daniel?”

“Chozen!” calls Susan, bursting from the backdoor of the house.

Johnny doesn't think he's ever seen her run before; he didn't know her body could even move this fast. She gets within three feet before turning and pitching herself backwards in a swoon; the man catches her easily. He stares Johnny down coldly while hefting her in a bridal carry like someone lifting a kitten.

“How did you even smash the lumber?” wonders Daniel, meanwhile. “It was in a *stack* on the *ground*.”

“We shall get drinks,” announces Chozen, and he turns back to the house with a rapturous Susan in his arms, leaving Johnny and Daniel alone in the wrecked yard.

What a guy, thinks Johnny. He shakes himself out of it and looks around at Daniel. He squints at him with the one eye that isn't swelling shut.

“You have really weird friends,” he says.

Daniel slides him an incensed look, jaw cocked and eyes burning. Johnny recognizes this as a sign of imminent loss of temper; Daniel once looked at him like this before ruining one of his sweaters with blueberry pie. He had been a bit of a hothead back in the day, before he decided to switch tactics from fighting back to driving Johnny crazy.

Before Daniel can launch into some more shouting, a noise makes them both twist around to look through one of the jagged holes in the fencing. An old woman is picking her way across the neighboring yard, looking at the debris that has made its way onto her property.

“Ah – yes, hi, Mrs. Kislak,” calls Daniel, hurrying forward with his hand up. “I'm sorry about this – we're doing some, um, renovations—”

Johnny sniffs and slowly rolls his head around his neck. After a moment, he reaches up and drags a clump of dirt from his hair.

If they're getting drinks, he should probably shower, he thinks.

Forty minutes later, the four of them are in a booth at a shitty bar five minutes away from Daniel's house. Johnny is on the inside next to the window and feeling smug about Daniel choosing to sit next to him. Susan and Chozen sit opposite.

He wonders if he can get away with having a beer. The fight in the yard kind of balances the calories out? He thinks about the warm line of Daniel's thigh next to his own and decides he gets to have a beer. One beer.

“Four shots of tequila, please,” says Susan to the waitress as she delivers them all water.

One beer and one shot of tequila, amends Johnny in his head.

Meanwhile, Daniel and Chozen appear to be locked in some kind of silent staring contest. Chozen's eyes are very still. The man is a statue. What a guy, thinks Johnny again. Pity he put his shirt back on, but drinking establishments do have rules about that kind of thing. It's a really flashy shirt, he notices. Is he? Johnny wonders what the history is here. He is suddenly thinking about the million little digs Susan has made about Daniel's love life. Is this an ex? A hot ex who knows karate?

He casually lifts his arm and puts it over the top of the booth behind Daniel, who doesn't seem to notice.

“So uh, what's your deal, man?” he asks.

Chozen switches his gaze to Johnny. “I have no deal.”

“Yeah? That's cool. Me either.”

“Actually, you'll like this, Johnny,” says Susan. “Chozen works on fights for action movies.”

He doesn't move. “Yeah? That's,” he never realized that was a thing someone could do for a living, what the fuck, “cool.”

Chozen waves a hand, dismissive. “A man living in exile must be able to support himself.”

“You're not in exile,” says Daniel evenly. His hands atop the table are very still. “You can buy a plane ticket any time. This is a matter of personal outlook. You should work on that.”

“I can never go home,” Chozen tells Johnny, ignoring him. “Is that not exile?” His eyes return to Daniel and narrow. His voice turns biting and sarcastic. “But perhaps my English is wrong.”

Johnny leans forward over the table, dropping his arm from the booth. “Yeah, no – exile. Absolutely. That's right.” Exile. He's never thought about it like that before. He likes that. It sounds so much better than disowned and abandoned, discarded. Rejected.

“What did you do?” he asks. “To be exiled, I mean.”

And then Johnny is forced to sit there and listen to the worst story he's ever heard. Turns out, after high school – a mere *six months* after he made such a big deal about refusing to fight Johnny in the All Valley Tournament – Daniel fought Chozen.

And Daniel won.

Johnny's vision almost swims. He clings to the table and stares blindly out the window as Chozen finishes talking.

“So after my fight with Daniel-san, I was disgraced.”

“Ah, ah,” says Daniel, putting a correcting hand up, “he was *embarrassed*.”

“I could not face the villagers,” Chozen continued.

“Because he was so embarrassed,” insists Daniel.

“So I traveled to America, to reclaim my honor from the one who defeated me in combat.”

“He knew I wouldn't tell him to go away, because I felt bad about putting him in the hospital.”

Johnny stares at Daniel. “You put him in the hospital?”

Daniel gives him a dark look like he doesn't like his jealous tone. Johnny shakes his head in disgust and looks back at Chozen, who says before taking another drink:

“Anyway, then I needed money to live in LA, so I got a job.”

Johnny shuffles his feet beneath the table, trying to keep his cool. So. A hot guy who got to fight Daniel shows up out of nowhere and also has the coolest job on the planet. Fine.

Johnny had felt so proud of the jeans he bought earlier that day. Fuck, he's such a joke. This is a nightmare. It can't get worse.

“Wait,” he says suddenly, and something in his tone makes the other three look at him.

He licks his lips nervously; he can say it. Clearly Daniel lives his life openly, and he and Susan talk about it like it's no big deal all the time, so. He should just say it. He has to know.

“Have you two fucked?” he asks.

Daniel's face twists. “No, of course not—”

“Once,” announces Chozen at the same time. “It was brief. And unsatisfying.”

Daniel stares at the table like it's a million miles away.

“I knew it,” says Susan, richly gratified and cackling. “Danny, you total slut.”

“Daniel-san's real skills do not lie in bed,” continues Chozen. “He is a warrior at heart.”

“He is?” asks Johnny, thoughts ping-ponging helplessly between the incandescent hotness of a Daniel who can actually do real karate and the nightmare of a Daniel who is bad at sex. “Look, *I*'ve – I mean.” He leans forward, beseeching. “You're *sure*?”

He can't decide what this all means. It could just be that Chozen and Daniel aren't compatible in bed (possible), or Chozen has such a mind-blowing sex life he has hopelessly high standards (very possible), or maybe Daniel has grown up to be a lousy lay (Johnny can't think about this, he has so little to live for as it is).

Chozen gives him a long, uncompromising look. “I didn't,” he says, "even finish."

He lifts his beer.

Johnny's eyes fly wide and he looks urgently to Daniel, who says loudly:

“That is a *lie* – look,” he says to Johnny, “don't believe a word this man says. He is just trying to provoke me into fighting. That's all he ever does. He shows up at the house whenever he's between shoots and he challenges me to a fight. He's obsessed! It's a sickness! He thinks we have some kind of insane rivalry, and if we just have a stupid rematch, his whole life will suddenly fall back into place and make sense, and he can go home and his uncle will *love* him again and __”

And Daniel cuts off, looking over sharply as Chozen slides out of the booth and walks away from the table. He puts up a hand as if he means to call out but loses the will halfway through the motion. He hangs his head and sighs.

“That was a little uncalled for,” says Susan. Daniel lifts his head to stare at her. “What? I'm just saying, you need to not take every comment about your performance as a lover so personally. Some people just have standards.”

Chapter 30: The Heart is a Lonely Pacifist

And then, in a turn perfectly typical of Daniel's life, Johnny Lawrence and Chozen Toguchi proceed to get shit-faced and become best fucking friends.

Apparently, they are each other's missing half. Now they can hold hands and karate kick their way across the meadow of life, whispering wildly skewed versions of their personal histories while blaming the rest of the world for their problems.

“This is so heart-warming,” says Susan, also shit-faced. She takes her next shot and slams the glass down heavily on the table upside down. She pauses, hand wavering. She points to the untouched glass in front of him. “Aren't you going to?”

“No,” he says.

She shrugs. “Suit yourself.” She nods over to where Johnny and Chozen are playing pool, taking turns showing off for each other. “You think this is more bearable sober? How does that work.” And she throws the second shot back.

“You know it's Thursday, right,” he says. “You do have to work tomorrow.”

“Vive la résistance,” she says, but her tone has gone noticeably dull. She looks around for the waitress.

He shakes his head.

After Johnny and Chozen have had their fill taking flashy trick shots (Chozen) and bending way farther over the table than is necessary (Johnny), they return to the booth. Daniel scoots in to give Johnny space, and the man follows so thoroughly after him, he practically ends up in Daniel's lap.

“You know,” he says, not quietly enough; breath hot on Daniel's face, “isn't this is basically like a date?”

“For who?” he says flatly.

He had such a nice, quiet little evening planned for them; nothing too fancy – Johnny could even go shirtless, if he wanted (though what he seemed to actually want was to keep destroying all of Daniel's shirts).

They were going to grab dinner at this one taco truck Daniel liked and then take a walk through the Japanese Garden at Woodley Park. And maybe at the end of it, Johnny would go *hey, remember that night I kidnapped you and we slept in my car down that way, and when you woke up my head was in your lap and I was holding your hand* and Daniel would say *yeah, I remember, Johnny.*

He looks away from Johnny's dumb-drunk crestfallen face and meets the eyes of the waitress, approaching their table.

“Another round,” says Susan, and Daniel hastens to belay that order.

“Ah, actually – we'll just take the check, thank you.”

Groans from all around the table. Daniel is no fun! Daniel is crushing what tiny bit of joy they were able to scrape together from the dishwater dregs of their lives! Daniel is little baby who probably can't even throw punch anymore! God, he hates dealing with drunk people.

He steals Susan's keys from her purse and corrals his morons, herding them out of the bar and down the dark street to where the Saab is parked. Five feet out the door, Susan decides she is tired and jumps on Chozen's back like she wants to pretend she's still twenty-two and trying with painful determination to like men.

“I could give you a ride too,” offers Johnny, in the same sidelong earnest tone he'd earlier, five drinks in, asked Daniel *so is it you can't get it up anymore, is that why we're not fucking?*

“Not in your condition you can't,” says Daniel darkly, and okay! He's a little resentful – so sue him. He's been working the night shift all week. He was supposed to have a romantic, meaningful night tonight. He was supposed to get to kiss Johnny and do it right, make it for real for once. Instead he gets... this.

“What are you talking about,” says Johnny. “I'm *great.*”

“One of your eyes is swollen shut and and you're weaving.” And he gets a hand on the other man's elbow to tug him away from the curb. But he doesn't anticipate Johnny swinging along with the motion so eagerly, and they both stumble.

Daniel gets them straightened out and back on track and then Johnny mutters down at the sidewalk, almost too quiet to hear:

“Why'd you fight him and not me?”

He casts him a disbelieving look. “I am not talking to you about this – you get it's not a happy memory for me, right? He basically forced my hand.” He looks to where Chozen is marching ahead, his strong arms tucked under Susan's thighs. He thinks about him lying in the hospital bed. “I'd never been in a fight before. Didn't know how to end it, and I was – I was scared. I lost control. And now I never get to forget.”

“Forget what?” says Johnny, but they are at the car, and this conversation is over, actually.

Daniel unlocks first the back then the passenger door before rounding to the driver's side.

Then something very peculiar happens: a group of people step out from around the corner of the squat brick title insurance building they are parked in front of, as if they'd been waiting for someone to come along.

There are five of them, and they are wearing black masks over their faces.

“Susan,” says Daniel. “Get in the car and lock the doors.”

And even drunk she must know this tone, because she slides off Chozen's back and obeys without arguing. He breathes slightly easier at the sound of the door locks clicking dully into place, one after the other.

Meanwhile, Johnny and Chozen are, of course, over the moon. Crowing and generally reacting like they've won the lottery – or know the guy who did and now get to jump him.

“You,” Chozen says to Johnny, smiling wide and pointing, “you are like – shiny lucky penny.”

The tiny part of his brain that is not completely focused on the approaching gang of masked thugs notices Johnny immediately brightens at this praise. Was he like this back in school? Daniel can't remember. After all, not like a lot of people were going around saying nice things about Johnny Lawrence. And why would they? He was a dick. Daniel had thought so, and he was half in love with the guy back then.

“No, man, you're *my* lucky penny,” Johnny says fervently.

Daniel half expects the two them to high five over how *fucking awesome* life is now that they're all in imminent danger of being assaulted. He decides to take control of the situation before it gets that grim.

He doesn't like how close the would-be assailants are to Johnny and Chozen, and he especially doesn't like the inexplicable but unshakable feeling their attention is focused on Johnny in particular.

“Okay, what is this?” he asks the silent figures, spreading his hands. “What do you want, our wallets? I'm afraid the end result will only disappoint you.”

“I have over five hundred dollars,” announces Chozen.

“And I have like, forty maybe?” says Johnny. “But also a bank card and three credit cards, so – you could go crazy with those, I guess.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Daniel asks him clearly.

Johnny shrugs and makes a slightly embarrassed face at him across the hood of the car, like *c'mon man, don't ruin this for me.*

Daniel sets his teeth and shakes his head. He should really just leave these two assholes to it – go ahead! Get killed by a terrifying pack of ski mask ninjas. Whatever. Daniel should unlock the driver door and get inside and watch it all play out with Susan, and that's if he doesn't decide to drive away and leave the two of them here. It would serve them right. He hasn't forgotten there is a broken window waiting for him back home, or the mess in the yard. He hasn't forgotten the slow and methodical seduction he's not getting to do tonight. So yeah. Go on ahead, Johnny. Charge into glorious battle to die a pointless death across the street from a vacuum repair shop. That sounds real impressive. Bet it's exactly how you've always dreamed of going out, so *go right the fuck ahead—*

Three men lunge for Johnny and Daniel reacts instantly, leaping and sliding over the hood of the car to intercept them.

Chapter 31: A Proportional Response

After the last guy has run limping away, a wide-eyed Susan slowly cranks the window of the Saab down. She sticks out her head and stares around at them a bit.

Finally, she says, heartfelt, “Jesus, Daniel.”

Daniel bends to snatch the car keys up from where he'd dropped them on the pavement somewhere between the first flying front kick and whatever that rolling flip thing was that took out the third guy. He makes a beeline for the driver door, tersely ordering as he passes Johnny:

“Get in the car.”

Johnny gets in the car.

He slumps heavily down in the passenger seat and stares sightlessly out the windshield. In his head, he can still see the beautiful high-arcing swing of Daniel's leg, the snapping twist of his hip. A power that came from nowhere, lighting that small body up like he was briefly possessed by some kind of ancient god of war.

“Now, you see,” Chozen is telling Susan as Daniel starts the car. “I did not make it up. You always thought I was joking, always like, *oh Chozen, you're so funny!* And I am. Very funny. One of my top qualities. But I never joke about this.”

“Guess not,” says Susan, still sounding lost. She leans forward between the front seats to stare hard at Daniel. “You actually do karate. Like, this whole time? *Real* karate and not just that weird solo dancing stuff?”

Daniel twists in his seat, putting his face an inch from hers. “Sit back,” he says, unamused, “and buckle up.”

She sits back but doesn't, from the sound of it, buckle up. “This is like finding out your sweet old grandma knows karate or was, I don't know, in the mob or witness protection or something. I mean, *god*, Daniel. What about that time we were all out at the nightclub a couple years back? We had to sneak you out as a girl when that one guy wanted to beat you up – and now it turns out you probably could've taken him?”

Johnny doesn't look over. His hands are two pressure bombs in his lap. He is barely hanging onto himself, the moment, reality.

(They fought well together. Perfectly, even. Like it was meant to be, or in another life they met and died together on a battlefield somewhere.)

“I don't like fighting,” says Daniel.

Johnny nearly chokes out a sound: high and desperate and tinged with hysteria. It's like hearing Axl Rose say he doesn't like singing. (This makes Johnny Slash.)

Daniel hits his indicator and checks over his shoulder before pulling slowly out into the dark, deserted street. Johnny swears he is driving even more primly than usual. Like, on purpose. As if maybe? if he acts really lame? they'll all forget what they just saw or what he really is.

“You let us put lipstick on you,” she continues, sounding more incensed with every word. “Ali and me thought we saved your life through eye shadow! Do you know how many people I've told that story to?”

“It's not my preferred way of presenting myself,” he says, checking his mirrors, “but personally, I thought I kinda pulled the look off. I was really cute – I'd date me.”

It might be the most Daniel LaRusso thing Daniel LaRusso has ever said. Right after *I don't like fighting*.

“Now you see,” says Chozen loudly again behind Daniel's seat. “Years, I tell people my story, and they look at Daniel-san and what does he do? He shrugs. He says – *oh jeez.* He offers them drinks and little sandwiches with the crusts cut off.”

“What can I say,” says Daniel. “I'm a people person.”

The two in the back seem to suck in a hissing lungful of air apiece. They start shouting at the same time in the next breath, voices overlapping into nonsense. Daniel's only response is to hunch stubbornly forward, his hands tightening on the steering wheel.

Johnny takes it all in from the helplessly acute awareness of his peripheral vision, staring at the passing streetlights and wishing maybe they'd be brighter: blot out everything else for as long as it takes to get back to Daniel's house and bedroom, where he might not

need to think. Please let him not think, just for a little while.

He thinks about how this all started. Johnny resisted it the way someone struggles against sucking quicksand: it just gets worse. Either way, he kind of always knew he was done for.

He first snuck out of the house at sixteen. He found a dark-lit bar down in the city that didn't care about his ID, found guys who didn't care about it either – not when he was so willing, his mouth eager to make up for his lack of experience. He was desperate to conjure sense out of the everything he was facing down.

He still thought he could fix it in the daylight, when all the real stuff happened. He met Ali, and he liked Ali. He could talk to her, and that itself felt like such a miracle – surely other miracles would follow?

But they didn't.

Daniel came on as a slow creeping burn, like a pepper you don't realize the heat of until you're four bites too late. By then, Johnny was so practiced at not looking at guys in that way. He really thought, at first, that he actually hated him – and he *did* hate him.

Fuck, but LaRusso was the worst? He bounced around like the same world that was crushing Johnny felt like nothing at all on his shoulders. When he wasn't hanging out chatting with only girls like some kind of faggy freak, he had his nose stuck in a book. Nerd! Except he was always so sure of himself. So deceptively confident, his foundations solid through and through. And the way he looked at Johnny was unbearable.

One clean cut of Daniel's eyes across a room, and Johnny knew, he just *knew* he saw and understood everything. Johnny must have been so obvious to him, so transparent and pathetic.

The only thing Johnny could think to do was eradicate the threat. Except when he tried – his panic and fury boiling over, blinding him to Ali's displeasure and the guys' bemused amusement – Daniel stopped it. He stopped everything, all of it—

All of it.

Johnny remembers a darkened kitchen. A kindling relief, like a flame

snatching at oxygen in the last second before it might be snuffed for good.

Everything that happened next, well – his mouth had never been used that way before. He didn't know kissing was something for guys like him, and he didn't know what he was doing, what the new rules were – but Daniel seemed to, and that was such a relief. Because by then, Johnny felt like he was losing the definition of everything else around him. He didn't know what was real anymore in the daylight, what counted.

He'd given it his all. He struck first, and was met with a block (and then another). There was nothing else to do? He'd tried. That was all anyone could ask, surely.

He did his best.

They get back to the house and Chozen throws himself upon the sofa, folds his hands over his stomach, and goes to sleep like it's a choice he is making. He snores. Susan disappears down the hallway into her room. Johnny follows Daniel into the kitchen and watches him stand with his hands on his hips, staring at the broken window.

“I'll call someone tomorrow,” he says, fidgeting impatiently by the end of the counter. “First thing. Promise.”

“That's not the point,” says Daniel, not looking around.

“What's the point?” He makes a decision of his own and drifts forward, silent on socked feet.

And Daniel does turn around then but he doesn't react to Johnny's sudden proximity beyond tilting his head up to stare at him with something like amazement. It's not a good amazement, Johnny thinks. But it will be.

“You got into *two* separate fights today,” says Daniel.

“Yeah.” Best day he's had in a long time; he has enough smarts not to say this, however. Daniel doesn't look like he'd understand just now. But he will. He has to: the way he fought beside Johnny, he must feel the same way somewhere deep down.

“It's crazy. I mean, we just got jumped by a, a veritable,” and Daniel trails off, looking down to where Johnny's hands have found his hips. “Wait.”

Johnny bends and lifts him up, getting him on the edge of the sink and stepping in close so he can feel how hard Johnny is in his jeans, how hard he's been for him since the fight.

“Hang on,” says Daniel, eyes flickering.

“No,” says Johnny, and he takes his face in hands and kisses him, knowing if Daniel really doesn't want him, he can stop it any moment.

Chapter 32: A Continuum of Force

It's like Daniel offered his hand again in dance, except this time Johnny lets himself accept. Because he finally understands the impulse to action, the moves. He gets it. It's everything he's always wanted but never had the words or even thoughts to hold in his head, and a thing without shape or form is no thing at all. He gets it now, though. It's not about blowing Daniel.

It's about blowing him while like, blowing *him*.

“Wait,” says Daniel again in a gasp, and he tilts his head like he is telling Johnny to press sucking kisses down his lovely long neck, so Johnny does that.

He figures it's one thing to want someone's body, and an entirely different thing to want how they exist in it.

Daniel's hands, is the thing. He uses them a lot – used them even more when he was younger. His fucking hands, moving through the air. And once you're already watching the play of his hands, you end up following the lithe line of his arm, and then it's all about Daniel's fucking arms, followed by his fucking shoulders and then you're in real trouble, because no direction is safe. You either go up to his pretty, expressive face, or follow the clean arrow of his body down as far it'll take you.

Johnny used to watch him, and he was never really thinking about *Daniel*. Daniel was a name attached to a concept that had little to do with those hands, those arms, those long legs. Daniel was nothing, and then he was a voice, and that voice happened to have a body Johnny already wanted to touch. And the voice said *what do you want?*

Johnny wants to see what it could be like if they worked together, like they had during the fight. If it's not just Johnny doing the touching. If he's listening and Daniel's talking but their bodies are also communicating on that same sub-spoken level they had when they took out the second guy; when Johnny dropped to sweep his legs while Daniel's own sung out across the night; when they didn't need words because they were basically the same person.

“Johnny, *stop*,” says Daniel, and he pushes him back.

He wriggles down off the edge of the sink. Johnny comes back in,

pinning him in place by locking their hips together, and he can't believe he'd worried Daniel couldn't get it up earlier. Daniel can get it up. Daniel should never let it go down, so cruel.

Daniel pushes him back again, more firmly, and Johnny obeys this time, though he gives him a flatly impatient look.

Daniel's mouth is reddened from use, and he licks it: a flicker at the corner, a swipe of the lower lip. He's breathing hard, harder than he had after the fight. Because Johnny gets him going. Johnny gets him going *so much*, he'll even fight when he doesn't want to.

Daniel says, “I told you, I wanted to take this slow. Tonight was not a date.”

“Yeah, I know.” Though Johnny doesn't, really – they went out for drinks with people and sat next to each other and Daniel let him touch him in small ways a couple times. It was basically a date? “But like, we fought together?” Daniel stares at him. “And we were good at it.” He waits a beat and elaborates, “Together.”

Surely Daniel gets it? He talks and acts like he's such an evolved guy, all in touch with his feelings and all that crap. He hates fighting but he fought with Johnny. This is pretty obvious stuff.

Except apparently not, because Daniel shakes his head and steps around him. Johnny turns in place, lost.

He thinks about letting it go, but then he thinks about the shape of Daniel's cock burning up against his hip, and he trails after him. He's no quitter, or he's recently decided not to be, anyway.

“Hey, I'm wooed,” he says, following him down the hallway.

He performs a quickstep and tries to snag the waistband of Daniel's jeans. Daniel slaps his hand down without looking back, which only makes Johnny want to do it again. Being told No in such loud terms is almost as good as being told Yes in quiet ones, especially if that No eventually turns into a Yes, and Johnny thinks it will. Johnny will be so good for him, Daniel will end up shouting Yes with everything he's got.

“Honest,” he tries again. “I feel really wooed.”

“Oh my god,” mutters Daniel and he goes into his bedroom and shuts the door in Johnny's face.

Johnny stops, stymied. This No feels less good. Is Daniel saying he doesn't want him in his bed anymore? But Chozen is already on the sofa?

He thinks about Daniel's cock, which he remembers as being a very pretty, very giving cock. Follow the line of that cock back and you've got a maddening set of hips, so grabbable, and either direction you go from there, it's going to be good: nuzzle down the length of those perfect legs that seem like they should include a set of springs for all the bouncing Daniel does when walking, or bite up his torso, over that brown belly that's soft from all the not-karate he devotes his life to. And the best part is, either one you choose, you can still do the other next.

He hadn't been lying. He feels wooed as fuck. Maybe Daniel thinks he is lying. Maybe he needs to show him.

Johnny puts his hand on the doorknob and shoulders inside the bedroom.

Daniel looks up from where he is sitting on the edge of the bed. He watches, dark-eyed, as Johnny shuts the door again.

“There's something you need to know,” says Daniel, and then he doesn't continue because Johnny has carefully dropped to his hands and knees on the floor. His head goes back a little, and he folds his lips together as Johnny crawls over to him.

He's just reminding him, in case he's forgotten. In case he'd started to think Johnny wasn't ready to listen or be worth the trouble because of the fighting, which wasn't even Johnny's fault if you think about it.

He eases up in front of Daniel, tucking his heels beneath his ass, and he reaches out to touch the man's ankles beneath the hem of his jeans.

“What do I need to know?” he asks belatedly, raising his eyes to Daniel, who bites his lip and shakes his head absently.

“That's the thing – I can't tell you it.”

Johnny puts his chin on his knee. “But I like when you tell me things.”

“I know,” says Daniel, tone going strange. He lifts a hand and brushes it down the side of Johnny's face, thumb pulling at his cheekbone lightly before stroking up his jaw. “But this is the kind of thing you gotta work out yourself.”

Johnny turns his face into his thigh, shutting his eyes for a long moment and breathing him in. When he opens them again, he looks at Daniel's lap.

“Will you tell me something else, then? Please?” His hands tighten over Daniel's ankles. “I really need it. Tonight, now.”

“Yeah?” murmurs Daniel, voice a low burr. “You in a bad way?” And when Johnny just nods, his hand slides back into his hair, tugging a little, and he says, “Get on the bed, Johnny.”

Chapter 33: crashing, sinking: the light above refracts

Johnny?

That you?

Last week, Daniel looked down at a stranger sitting broken on a curb and the simple power of his gaze was enough to recall Johnny from those sunken depths of misery. Where once Daniel's attention was a threat, now it's a lifeline. It means something that he recognized him even under the weight of a decade of failures.

Would you look at that.

It is you.

There is no book in Daniel's lap right now. No appearances to uphold, no place he has to be other than here with Johnny. And yeah, his attention is a lifeline – Johnny is perfectly willing to sit and soak in the spill of it – but also? Johnny is hoping for something more physical.

Daniel sits on the edge of the bed, watching him over his shoulder, so he keeps himself relaxed: his gaze, quiet. He kneels in the middle of the mattress and waits, hands on his thighs, moving only his eyes when Daniel untwists himself and finally shifts up to join him.

Daniel tilts his head, considering him.

And he has to know, anything he gives Johnny, he'll take and be grateful. He won't be greedy, and if he's not greedy maybe Daniel will give him more? And the attention will keep flowing, shoring up the

borders of what it means to be Johnny Lawrence.

Daniel slowly tucks his index and middle fingers into the waistband of Johnny's jeans. He tugs and when Johnny sways in flush against his knuckles, he stiffens his wrist and fist, pressing back; Johnny stops. And like he's rewarding Johnny (please be rewarding Johnny), Daniel thumbs the top button of his fly from its eyehole.

“So, you bought some pants before a car after all,” he says, smiling warmly up into Johnny's eyes. “So practical. What changed your mind?”

“Shouldn't wear running shorts on a date,” says Johnny, nonplussed.

Daniel seems to like that. He likes it so much, he jerks the next four buttons loose in quick succession. The sides of Johnny's stiff new jeans fold open, alleviating some of the pressure on his cock.

Daniel looks down at the blue cotton bulge cresting the open front of the jeans, but he doesn't reach to touch it. Instead, he skims a hand up along Johnny's hip just below the fitted edge of his T-shirt, thumbnail inciding a clean white line along his skin that fades almost as quick as it is made.

“New jeans but not a shirt?” he inquires. He only sounds curious, but even drawing attention to something can be be a criticism. People can't ever just let things be.

“Do you want me to stop wearing your stuff?” asks Johnny carefully.

He's not an idiot, he knows he's stretching out the arms and shoulders and chest. It would make total sense if Daniel wants him to stop. It wouldn't even mean anything, probably. It's not like the shirts are a badge declaring any kind of claim – except of course, next time Daniel wears one of the shirts, it'll be obvious Johnny had been there. The neck will sit differently over his collarbones. Stretched to fit Johnny but still suiting Daniel nicely. That might mean something, maybe. If Daniel lets it.

“I didn't say that,” says Daniel. His tone is a question and Johnny is trying to listen, he is.

What do you want, Johnny?

“I want to wear it,” he says, swallowing hard. He dares to lift a hand in a mirror of Daniel's own, folding his fingers over the smooth spareness of his waist beneath his shirt, a shirt Johnny clearly hasn't been in yet because it still fits him perfectly.

Daniel searches his face closely. His expression gives no warning for when he flips his hand, palming his stomach. He plunges down beneath the band of Johnny's boxers and takes hold of him. Johnny sways again.

“Hey, I got you,” murmurs Daniel. “I got you, Johnny.” This time Daniel doesn't halt his forward progress. He lets him land and half-curl over him, Johnny's mouth hard against the beach head of Daniel's shoulder.

What would you do, if I told you to talk about it?

“I,” says Johnny, pushing the words out. “I like – how you smell. Like having it around.” And he takes a dragging breath to prove it to himself. Daniel hadn't showered when he got home, and his skin still carries a taste of the fight.

“That right?”

Daniel turns his head to press a kiss to where his neck and shoulder meet, swiping the bunching muscle with his tongue like maybe he tastes the same thing and likes it. He moves his hand a little, and the ridge of rough skin on his palm, the calluses on the lower pads of his fingers, make Johnny jerk: a flinch or begging, even he can't tell.

Daniel's got rough hands, hands rougher than his own: a real man's hands. They feel different than anything he's had in a long time – years? It's been years since someone touched him like this. Maybe there hasn't been anyone since Daniel? Johnny always gets pretty drunk, so he can't be sure. Usually he lets his mouth get used and takes care of himself. It feels safer, they said it was safer that way. And yeah, a handjob would be even safer, but the few times someone has tried reaching down, he always backpedaled hard.

“You – feel good,” he says thickly. “Feels. Real good.”

He distantly realizes he sounds stupid. Like, obviously it feels good. He's hard. But it's the only words he can form and get out.

Daniel's hand tightens around him and his other hand wraps around the back of Johnny's neck, cupping his skull and urging Johnny to turn his head. And when he obeys, Daniel kisses him, licking deep.

It's permission, it has to be.

Johnny springs into action, dragging his hands down the other man's miraculous body, squeezing his ass and lifting a little. And Daniel goes with it eagerly, riding his thigh as they topple sideways, still kissing.

What follows is almost overwhelming, too much. They were less clumsy as teenagers: more constrained in their respective roles and turn-taking.

Johnny almost knees Daniel in the groin as he frantically kicks off his jeans and boxers. Daniel somehow gets the zipper of his own pants caught in the front of his underwear. Johnny is too quick in surging up to kiss his chest as he is hauling his shirt overhead, and Daniel actually does elbow him in the forehead then – but Daniel only gasps out a laughing *oh god I'm sorry*, the breathless words blurring and flattening into nothing as he seals his mouth over Johnny's again, and that's better than any weird apology.

Daniel's arms twine around his neck to pull him in close. Every place he is pressed against Daniel lights up, the reality of his touch so unbelievable but at the same time undeniable: is this happening? this can't be happening. Is it real? He knows his body and it doesn't work like this, it's not meant to feel this good. Except Daniel tells him it can, it does, and he doesn't want to disagree with him.

He can feel Daniel's desire against his stomach. It draws all his attention inexorably towards it; Daniel wants something from him, and he wants so badly to give it. And he knows he shouldn't ask for more when he's already being given his skin and all this attention, but:

“Please,” he says, breaking away to roll his forehead along Daniel's collarbone. “Please give it to me. I need it, I want it, *please*.”

Daniel pushes up on his forearms and looks down at him with a smile fading into seriousness, eyes half-veiled by the fall of his hair. He's flushed and breathing hard, all that heat trapped inside pushing up against his barriers. Reaching for Johnny even as the man himself holds back. Please don't hold back. It doesn't work if we both don't hang on as hard we can.

I was trying to treat you like a human being.

“I can take it,” says Johnny.

“What's *it*,” he says, wavering in the air above, the whipcord line of his body pulling taut like it might be yanked away or lashed forward, no telling which.

You're just a fucking animal, aren't you.

“Anything,” he says, mindless.

He flexes up bodily a few inches, fruitlessly trying to reach him without cheating and *reaching* for him. He could pull him down right now, but only in the same way he could theoretically go throw himself in front of a car, which is something he might do if Daniel decides Johnny doesn't deserve his cock.

“Anything you want," he tries again.

Daniel licks his lips. “You think I'm holding out on you, Johnny? Like maybe I don't want you too?”

Johnny opens his mouth to respond but stalls out, sucking in useless air for too-long seconds. Daniel's tone was soft and coaxing but the words themselves were shaped like a warning. He doesn't know the right response to give; obviously Daniel doesn't want him as badly as Johnny needs him. He made that perfectly clear long ago.

Anxiety twists in his stomach and he can't help jerking briefly beneath Daniel. Fretful and pleading. It's humiliating. He used to be so much better at holding perfectly still at all times, never asking for anything.

And it's not that he thinks he deserves it more now, but it's only, he's got nothing else. Nothing left. He's so empty.

“Please,” he says, and this is how desperate he has become: he asks for mercy—

Daniel brushes Johnny's hair back from his forehead, follows the touch up with a firmer grip on his jaw. He pinches the tip of his chin and looks him in the eye. “You need my dick this bad, you think there's a universe where I wouldn't give it to you?”

—but Daniel believes in mercy, Johnny remembers.

He goes limp against the bed with relief. His damp eyes slide shut and he tips his face into Daniel's hand, giving himself over to whatever he chooses to do with it.

“That's right,” murmurs Daniel.

He lowers himself back down, putting skin to skin again. He straddles Johnny's chest, and the wide easy splay of his skinny thighs is the best thing Johnny has ever felt. He runs his hands up and down the long, hairy length of them like a blind man learning reality by touch.

Daniel's thumb presses at his mouth, and Johnny opens up for it: please and thank you.

“You know I'm going to take care of you,” he says, and Johnny can smell him now: he's leaking, and so, so close.

The thumb lifts away and is replaced by the silky tip of his cock. A hand slides up the back of Johnny's head, angling him to where he can best accept it, be fed.

“That's right,” says Daniel again. “Look at that. C'mon Johnny, you're taking it so good. Love that. Love your mouth, sweetheart.”

Every new touch settles his nerves, and every word rolls into him heavy and soothing like a spilling breaker on the beach, and he begins to gently disappear until finally, as Daniel's cock glides over his tongue: finally, there is nothing at all left.

Chapter 34: ...

He only stirs when the mattress behind him creaks. The heat at his back disappears along with the nominal extra weight on the bed. He doesn't look around; his alarm hasn't gone off. He doesn't want to leave this space yet. He turns his head into the pillow and squeezes his eyes shut.

Some time later, or maybe just a few seconds, the bed dips again. *Such a shitty mattress*, his brain goes, and then he twitches because Daniel has pulled the sheet away. He makes a low, protesting grunt which fragments and fades because the other man's hand is journeying up the bare length of his side: calf to cupping his knee to squeezing his thigh. Traveling further to sketch light shapes into his hip.

“You awake?” asks Daniel.

“No,” says Johnny, because maybe if he doesn't wake up this can continue.

“You sure?” And he settles down behind Johnny, still at a distance but his hand working his flank. He presses his mouth to the top of his spine and says, “You sound awake.”

Johnny keeps his eyes closed but chews on the situation for a second, thinking about the night before. He dares to say, “What do I get if I am?”

Daniel only laughs. “Well, that didn't take long, did it.” And the words could be taken many ways, but his tone is only satisfied.

He finally slides in close and, as Johnny absorbs a few crucial new facts of the situation – or maybe just the one fact, the only fact: Daniel's hard cock slick with lube and riding the crack of his ass – Daniel says into his ear:

“Luckily, I already had a reward in mind.”

Johnny can't speak, can't think. He keeps his eyes closed. His entire body had gone tight and alert in hungry disbelief. He never imagined Daniel might give this without him begging first.

Daniel makes a wordless sound of comfort and presses a kiss to his shoulder blade, and this startles him back into the world of

movement, desperately writhing into the bed, pressing his ass against the hot length of that cock. He's already thinking about it, the possible burn and stretch of it: Daniel using his body for his own pleasure.

“Easy, easy,” says Daniel, “hey, we're only having a bit of lie-in here. You don't even have to do anything, okay? I promise it'll be good, you just relax – well, actually. Raise your leg first.”

And when Johnny obeys, Daniel fits his cock through the space before patting his thigh, closing it back down tightly around him. He sighs and fucks forward a few lazy inches. He hums. He nuzzles. His cock glides across Johnny's taint and nudges his balls.

Johnny shakes, his bare feet scrabbling against the sheets. He sucks in air and ducks his head, tucking his arm beneath his pillow so he can watch the jostle of his own hard cock: so this is what it looks like when he gets fucked. He wishes Daniel could see what he is seeing. He wishes he could see what Daniel is seeing: Daniel's cock disappearing into him, the reddening chap of his thighs taking it.

Daniel stops thrusting for a moment, straining back like he's reaching for something. When he resumes, his hand is slick and wrapping warmly around Johnny.

“Oh, that's better,” says Daniel, settling into an easy, languid rhythm, his thrusts and his arm working in locomotive tandem. “Hey, what if it was just like this always, hm? You stay right here in my bed,” and Johnny can't speak, so he only nods along, “waiting for me, nice and ready. What if I wake you up every day like this?”

Please.

“You looked so good lying there, I just couldn't help it.” And Daniel noses through his hair, takes a few strands between his lips and pulls. “Made me wanna come right back to bed,” and Johnny continues nodding feverishly, “and touch you, never stop,” *no, never*, agrees Johnny, as Daniel's hand slips down his shaft and carefully massages his balls, “never stop fucking you – hey, what do you want for breakfast?”

“I,” Johnny pants and cracks his eyes open. “I – what?”

Daniel drops his balls and grips his hip, thrusting hard enough to rock them both forward several inches across the creaking mattress.

“Breakfast,” he says brightly.

He plants a swift hard kiss to Johnny's shoulder and rolls him onto his front, cock still nestled high up in the sensitive soft skin of his inner thighs. He fucks him down into the mattress and Johnny rubs his face in his pillow, rolling along his forehead to get some air, he just needs some air so he can express, what was he going to express? What were they – ?

“I'm thinking Eggs in Purgatory,” continues Daniel. “You ever have that?”

Johnny makes a sound as his lubed cock drags against the cheap sheets heated from their bodies. He shakes his head frantically.

“Oh, you're going to love it,” he says, and he squeezes Johnny's ass almost absently.

“Hnngh?” says Johnny.

“You got your tomato base, right, with some red pepper flakes, fresh basil and garlic – poach the eggs in the sauce, sprinkle some Parmigiano Reggiano over everything, pair it with the nice crusty bread I brought home yesterday—”

“What. What the fuck?” mutters Johnny, but he digs his knees into the mattress and tilts his hips, and the pressure of Daniel's cock along his taint dissolves his thoughts again. He's so confused, but his body doesn't seem to care. It just feels Daniel working away, hears the dark timbre of his voice, the vibration of it when the man presses his chest to Johnny's back.

“Maybe I won't even let you get up,” muses Daniel, the only sign that he's currently fucking Johnny betrayed by a slight breathless strain in his voice. “Breakfast in bed, keep you naked for it. I think I have an idea of what you might like for dessert.” And his non-lubed hand is suddenly brushing along Johnny's jaw, fingers prodding his lower lip, demanding entry.

“Fuck,” chokes out Johnny, and he turns his face to suck hard on those fingers as Daniel grunts and comes between his legs. He slumps over him, free hand clasping and releasing his side in clumsy appreciation.

Johnny keeps suckling his fingers and grinding into the mattress: could he come from just this? Daniel lets him gamely try for a few seconds, before he pulls himself away: softening cock slipping messily out from between his legs, hand retracting from his mouth.

Before Johnny can feel anything more than the beginning sting of loss, he is rolled onto his back and there is no more insane talk about food because Daniel is licking eagerly over the head of his cock.

Johnny pounds his fists in the mattress and jolts up, too rough and uncontrolled to be any good for him. But Daniel doesn't seem to disapprove – or, he doesn't stop, anyway. Johnny only lasts a few more seconds before spilling into his mouth.

He lies limp afterwards, his whole body useless and unmovable. He stares dumbly at the brightly lit ceiling, the spaces between his thoughts wide and airy like a pristine stretch of beach. Daniel drags an idle finger through the mess coating his upper thighs and balls and Johnny doesn't even so much as twitch.

Daniel's face appears overhead. He is flushed attractively, brown eyes lit up and warm.

“So,” he says, his slight breathlessness making him sound like he's been laughing the whole time, “about breakfast.”

A doorbell dings across the whole house, followed by a loud pounding knock less than a second later. Daniel's brow quirks and he glances to the closed door of his bedroom, nonplussed.

Johnny stares past his face to the ceiling again: the white of it. He is getting up at six. His alarm hasn't gone off yet. The room is very bright.

He twists to look at the window, where golden mid-morning sun is laying siege to the thin curtains. He looks at the clock on the bedside table: quarter to nine. He was supposed to be at the gym forty-five minutes ago.

“Did you shut off my alarm?” he asks.

The numbing power of the words bleeds and spreads, turning his whole body cold from the inside out.

“What?” Daniel shifts atop his legs, glancing between him and the door, distracted. “Oh, yeah – figured after the day you had yesterday, you could use the sleep. If you still want to hit the gym later, I could drop you on my way into work.”

Out in the other room, Chozen says, “You knock like a cop in the movies. Very loud, very rude.”

And Sensei says, “My apologies. But I am looking for a Johnny Lawrence. Is he staying here?”

Chapter 35: War / Peace

he's only heard it a handful of times
but he knows this voice.
daniel, wait, says johnny,
scrambling. his hands are trembling,
and he has gone pale
beneath the lingering flush of lovemaking.
daniel doesn't wait.
The young man who came down the hallway next was not familiar to John, who'd half expected to discover one of his lesser talents in possession of the dump – Dutch, perhaps.
(Beneath his expensive threads, that boy had always seemed like a
rott-owning
beer-swilling
child-hitting
trailer-dwelling
piece of human trash waiting to emerge. But
he was useful to have around the dojo and in tournaments.)
The boy had dark hair, a soft face. His bare chest beneath the open plaid he'd clearly just thrown on was skinny and ill-formed like
Twig on the first day of Basic,
or Twig the day they shipped out,
or Twig when they first learned karate
or Twig in the—
But his eyes were more wary than Twig's ever had been,
even after everything.

There was a fight in this room, and it was not a fair one.
I don't like,
I don't like his face.
of clothes you don't quite fit in the same
and the way you don't quite fit in the same
What the fuck was Lawrence doing in this house?
The answer came hustling down the hallway in a pair of running shorts,
gym bag in hand and face perfectly blank.
But his chest was pink,
and there is
something wet
running
down
his
leg

daniel sweeps his gaze up and down the length
of the fighter again, missing nothing.
He did see anything of John's, let alone this
"I'm sorry. Sorry," said Lawrence, and he said it as though he meant it, as though he were
just an extra *apologizing*
"Look, we don't need to speak of last night, I think. Let's both move on," John said,
saying what he was thinking the moment he saw Lawrence, careful to give nothing away.
What is this? chozen asks him. *Why are you playing with this man, with this guy?*
looking back at the other day, but John's eyes shut down
"Well – John," said John. "Get in the car."
food, and his eyebrows rise as if to say, are you serious? Lawrence went red.
"I can't, I'm on the fucking diet," Lawrence said, but stepped out the door.
daniel stares at the fairy. He thought about telling them to
say goodbye.
But he didn't. He didn't see anything
Apologies for interrupting your training,"
and said politely, "My fighter and I have a lot
to do."
In the car, Lawrence sat straight in his seat with his legs together, but it didn't matter – John could still smell everything: the booze, the sex, the weakness.
John put his key in the ignition but paused. He didn't know how he was going to shake the boy out of this, but he knew he had to try.
"I thought you'd given this shit up," he said at last.
"It's not what – it's not like that," said Lawrence.
There were many responses John could make to this obvious lie. He could reach over and take his thigh in a punishing grip, swipe at the filth coating his skin and shove it in his face, demand to know just *what it's like*. He could reach across the boy and open the door, order he get out and run behind the car the entire way to the gym. He could simply tell him this was over, and let the begging fill the car until there was nothing left in the world for either of them but Lawrence's need for his approval and acceptance.
Ultimately, he said, "Maybe you should come stay with me. I can keep an eye on you, make sure you are not – distracted."
Lawrence went still.
daniel staggers
across the carpet into the dining area,
chozen watching with great puzzlement.
it's happening again; did it ever really stop?
"who was that? what is his deal?" asks chozen, in english now because there's no one around to privately insult.
and daniel is forced to admit to himself:
he has no idea.

he hasn't been to church since he was maybe eight
and didn't even realize he had this impulse in him:
to equate suffering with goodness.
questions cause a twenty-car pile-up in his head.
what if johnny lawrence hasn't changed?
what if he still believes all that terrible shit?
what is daniel willing to overlook?
and
what is he willing to do?

Chapter 36: Operation: What You Take

sure you don't want any help? asks
tommy, and you shake your head *no.*
this is a one-man kind of job:
in and out, quick and clean. besides,
you don't want him asking more questions
than the ones he has already asked.

(*man, you must've done something real bad*
this time, if your step dad snapped
and even your mom couldn't stop him.)

so you slip out of the car,
and quickly round the house to knock
at the kitchen's back door, nerves jumping
like you have not already been discovered
in the only way that really matters.
the housekeeper gives you ten minutes inside.

(*she shouldn't be home for another hour.*
hurry and don't take anything too obvious.
they absolutely can't know you were here.)

through, through the gleaming rooms you go,
familiar walls you could never really know,
up the grand staircase, take the left—
your room hasn't been cleared out yet,
johnny lawrence's life is all still there.
he is going places, a professional athlete.

(*this is why they killed your contract,*
probably. too risky, investing in a limp-wristed
fighter, some fag panting after real men.)

you don't have much time to choose.
what do you take? what actually matters?
the clock's ticking. suddenly everything is worthless.
clothes? clothes you can buy, except for
your old, too-small jacket, your headband, and
a dark plaid that was never yours.

(*the papers you grab say: you existed,*
you graduated, this girl once loved you,

'that care bear jacket is kinda cute')

but otherwise, standing center in the fallout
of your life, it becomes too clear
how little most things matter, the possessions
you always took so much pride in.
you want the memories you won't get.
when you leave the room, she's there.

(she stares, says nothing. she's in mourning,
like you're already dead, and her grief
won't even permit giving a proper eulogy.)

back down in the car, tommy says:
that's it? we came all this way
for one box? don't you need more?
where's all your clothes, your sweet posters?
what about your stereo and tape collection?
dude, did you even grab your toothbrush?

as you clutch the box tightly, you think maybe you don't really need it either; this might even be true someday, in another life.

“No,” says Johnny.

Chapter 37: Hopscotch

It takes them both by surprise.

“No?” says Sensei, and Johnny's stomach turns leaden.

He stares straight ahead through the windshield. He doesn't see the passing houses he has already started to grow used to jogging past, or the traffic, the street, the sky above. The outside doesn't feel real or touchable. But he thinks that's probably not true, maybe.

There has to be a way through this. If he says all the right things, and downplays the bad ones, and skips over the crack in the sidewalk, he can weave a path to the other side.

“I'm not distracted,” he says, addressing the worry instead of the offer. “Training is my main focus, every day. Da – he was telling the truth, about the mugging last night. And the alarm.”

Sensei stops at the traffic light at the end of Daniel's street and looks over at him, attention clearly focusing on the black eye. He says dismissively, “All faggotry aside, you shouldn't be boarding with someone who will mess with your training. Someone you can't trust.”

“It was a misunderstanding, that's all,” he says, forcibly steady. “It won't happen again.”

“Place is a dump, anyway,” says Sensei, and Johnny realizes with panic that he sounds like the matter is already settled. “We'll swing by after training, pick your stuff up—”

“*No.*”

Johnny realizes he has said it again at the same time as Sensei, who cuts a frowning look over to him. He glances back, unsettled and uneasy. His hands have gone numb. But for some reason he doesn't take it back, even though the words are stampeding, cluttering up his mouth and jockeying to get out.

He shoves them aside and hurries to add, “I – I can't move out. I have to,” thinking quickly, “I promised I'd help fix the place up. I gave my *word*. He helped me, once. So – I owe him.”

Sensei's eyes narrow in thought and Johnny stops himself from babbling any further. He's said what he's said, he has to leave it and

wait for judgment and sentencing.

The silence lasts for a couple miles, fraught uncertainty against the backdrop of strip malls and lazy summer late morning traffic. Johnny shifts slightly in his seat and immediately stops again because he can feel the tacky mess between his legs. It fills him with as much cold, shrinking humiliation as it does longing, and he doesn't much want to feel either of these things.

“I booked you a fight,” says Sensei at last.

Johnny whips around and stares at the side of his face; the man has gone bland and thoughtful, hands easy on the wheel. Like nothing at all has happened.

“A fight?” he says cautiously. “That's – great. When? How soon?”

“Two weeks. You do well and I think we can get you in as an alternate in a local circuit run by a man I know. Establish your profile.”

Something strange is happening to his pulse: it's finally settling. He can't quite believe it's over, that everything is okay, but as they pull up in front of the gym, Sensei says nothing more about Daniel or making Johnny move. It's almost like he has completely forgotten about it. And Johnny knows this isn't actually the case, obviously, but he is all too willing and grateful to play along, to be allowed to pretend again.

It feels a little like acceptance. Sensei already knew this thing about him – maybe he's coming around, slowly, in his own way.

They park and Johnny opens the car door. He swings his leg out onto the street, wincing as Daniel's drying spunk pulls sharply at his pubes. In the split-second before he stands, he can smell them again. His stomach twists uneasily.

He looks over the top of the car. “Sensei?” Kreese meets his eyes as he rounds the car. “I just – thanks. For not pushing on this, I mean.”

Kreese tosses his keys from hand to hand. He raises his eyebrows and says only, “You're not a kid anymore, Mr. Lawrence. What you choose to do is entirely up to you. I can only stand by and hope you make the right decisions.” He pauses, tilting his head in consideration. “I just don't want you to let yourself down.”

Johnny nods, cheeks warm. He shuts the car door and follows the man

inside the gym, clearing his mind of everything but what he needs his body to be, to do.

He can barely walk after training, but as he waits for his taxi he does a lot of thinking, and when the cab arrives, he tells the driver to drive him to the nearest hardware store, tells him to keep the meter running as he ducks inside.

The guy is leaning up against the driver door smoking a cigarette and frowning at the blue sky by the time Johnny rolls his cart back out. He pinches the cigarette between his lips and says out of the corner of his mouth, skeptical:

“Hombre, what do you think I am, a Man With a Van?”

“Of course not,” says Johnny. “That's a Peugeot.” Like, hello.

He takes his cigarette out of his mouth and uses it as punctuation to the stabbing finger. “You see that trunk?”

Why does everyone have to be so difficult, about everything, constantly? “The back seat goes down, doesn't it?”

The driver tosses the cigarette, over it. “Your dime, man.”

It's not a long drive back to Daniel's house, but Johnny is relieved to climb out of the cab and fork over all his cash for the prize of hauling everything out onto the front lawn and feeling like he's accomplished something.

After the man has driven off, he looks to the side of the house, where he usually enters. Then he walks up to the front door and knocks.

Susan and Chozen are both home, and neither of them think much of his plan. Or at least – Susan doesn't until she realizes he isn't asking for her help, at which point she switches sides and starts talking about taking out a lawn chair and making margaritas. This leaves Chozen standing at the edge of the dining area, folding his arms over his impressive chest.

“I am not unemployed,” he says slowly, like maybe Johnny is the one whose second language is English. He waves a hand. “I make a phone call, I fix everything.”

Johnny glances away from where Susan is digging in the freezer for ice. “Did you?”

“Did I?”

“Call someone.”

He is offended. “Of course – window is totally taken care of! Monday morning. A much nicer window than the one Daniel-san had. He should thank me,” he adds, looking around at Susan in the kitchen. She makes a noise of agreement without look up from fussing with Daniel's blender.

And this sounds reasonable to Johnny too. But still.

“We broke some of the fencing,” he points out.

Chozen heaves a sigh that lifts his whole chest. He rubs the back of his neck, and his bicep looks really good as he does it. His expression is unconvinced.

“Think of all the bitching he won't get to do if we fix it,” says Johnny.

“He was very upset after you left,” says Chozen, which is the last thing Johnny needs to hear, or at least so he thinks until a second later, when a terrible harsh racket fills the room.

They both startle and look over to the kitchen. The noise stops and Susan pats the top of the blender like it's a prize race horse.

“Margaritas and yard work?” she says. “I provide the former, you do all the latter? And someone fills me in on why Daniel was upset?” And she smiles like it's all a threat.

Chapter 38: Smoothing Things Over

It's like if a blind person tried talking to a deaf person with the help of a mute person who didn't know how to sign. Or something. Or maybe they're all just really lousy at communicating; Johnny knows he kind of is, his annual performance review said so three years running.

“Is it because I didn't eat breakfast?” he asks Chozen.

“Even Daniel is not that much of a mother hen,” says Susan, still eyeing him suspiciously. He shrugs and she doesn't seem to like this. She asks Chozen, “What did he say?”

“He said nothing,” says Chozen, harried. “He sat in this chair looking very pathetic," and he demonstrated for them, slumping in the chair and putting on an exaggeratedly sad face, or at least Johnny's hoping because, fuck, "and then he got dressed and left for work.” He reflects and adds, in a tone of great discovery, “*He* didn't eat breakfast either!”

They all contemplate this grave new fact.

“Okay, back up,” says Susan.

She slices a lime and squeezes the halves over a measuring cup. Johnny appreciates that she isn't letting the conversation delay the margaritas – his appreciation is mostly philosophical in nature, since he's obviously not partaking, even though his whole body is pretty sore and it's also hot outside and he's about to perform manual labor. But there was a certain satisfaction to be got from denial, or so he's telling himself. It used to be easier to listen, he doesn't know what's up with that.

“You didn't eat breakfast,” she says, checking. Johnny nods. “Because you got up late and had to go to training.”

“Yeah, Sensei came by the house when I didn't show. It was – not great. But I smoothed things over with him. It's fine now.”

“Daniel-san called him *Brother Leon Motherfucker*,” supplies Chozen.

“I thought you said he didn't say anything,” she says, accusing. She dumps a tray's worth of ice cubes into the blender and pours the lime juice over it.

He shrugs, unapologetic. “He said that. I do not know this Brother

Leon and didn't think it important."

She chews the corner of her mouth. "Okay, I don't know who he is either – but your old teacher, huh. That Kreese guy always seemed kinda scary."

"Uh, yeah, he's a badass," says Johnny, not quite liking the direction the conversation is going in.

"And does Daniel have a history with this *badass*? Didn't you guys have that bet or whatever first semester senior year?"

Johnny hesitates. Daniel probably remembers Sensei Kreese better than Kreese remembers him. He gets why he might not want to be friendly with the guy, after the bet and all – but he's welcomed Johnny into his house, and Johnny did way worse stuff to him than Sensei ever did. Sensei never hit Daniel, after all. He barely even looked at him. There's no real reason to hold a grudge, and anyway, Daniel doesn't seem like the grudge-holding type; Chozen tried to kill him, and now the guy is sitting at his kitchen table, chair balanced back on two legs.

It's gotta be the fighting, he thinks. It's one thing to know *theoretically* that Johnny is training for a fight, and another to have proof show up on his doorstep. Johnny just needs to be more careful not to shove it in his face so much. Don't cross the streams. This probably means easing off on talking about how good Daniel is at karate, though, which will be tough. Hey, Axl Rose, I love your lasagna, said no one ever.

"Look, it's not a big deal. I'm sure Daniel's over it by now," he says, distracted. "And if he's not, I'll smooth things over with him too."

"Yeah, I bet you will," says Susan, tone heavily insinuating, and then she adds, automatic almost like a disclaimer: "And you better."

She switches on the blender, ending the conversation in a pulverizing spin of ice and tequila.

Johnny and Chozen stand beside the first hole in the fence, looking at the splintered wood.

"It was a really great kick," Johnny tells him.

Chozen nods, accepting the compliment. “Your duck – you have good reflexes, very fast.”

Johnny grins. “Yeah, thanks. Thanks, man.”

They return to considering the hole. Johnny reaches out and pulls lightly at the broken board, testing the give. It wobbles, but the nail is still most embedded in the post. His mouth twists.

“You know anything about like, carpentry?” he asks.

He sniffs, tips his chin. “I pay people to know about carpentry.”

“Yeah. Yeah, me too – okay, well. How hard can it be? Take the broken board down, put one up in its place and hammer in some nails. Easy, right?”

“Easy,” says Chozen decisively.

“I think you bought the wrong kind of boards,” says Susan, tipping her head like a different angle might makes the spaces between the planks less big. And maybe it does? Johnny cocks his head to match. No, still looks bad. What the hell.

“I swear they looked the same in the store,” says Johnny, heart sinking a little. He's going to have to go back, get different ones. He should probably measure them this time.

The other two take sips from their margaritas.

Fence repair thus off the table for the night, Johnny insists they finish painting the house – this, at least, is a foolproof activity. Daniel already has the paint and brushes.

“But it's ugly,” says Chozen.

“So ugly,” agrees Susan, who is reclining in a bikini and a pair of large sunglasses, even though it's getting on towards evening and the sun is behind the house.

“Yeah,” says Johnny, because it's so, so true. “But it's uglier half-

finished. This way, if it's all done, maybe Daniel will wake up and realize how ugly it is and then repaint it."

"You want to finish painting the house just so he'll paint over it again?"

"So long as the job's not done, he won't move on," insists Johnny, with a conviction he doesn't understand but won't question.

"No, I cannot condone this color," decides Chozen, and he unfolds a second lawn chair and sets it up next to Susan's. He doesn't even take off his shirt, so it's an all-around disappointment.

Johnny doesn't give up, standing at the foot of their lawn chairs with his arms folded. "You know, painting can be a great work-out for the arms."

"I am on a rest day," says Chozen, who admittedly doesn't need to improve upon perfection.

"Susan?" he tries. "Don't think a chick can't have a little muscle on her. Could be really... hot." Probably.

But she only gives him a look over the top of her sunglasses like he's the dumbest man alive. "If I put on muscle, the next woman who comes along might think she doesn't need to open jars and doors and stuff for me. She'll feel useless. She could be the love of my life, and we'll never know because she thinks I'm self-sufficient. Get real, Johnny."

And she slides the sunglasses back up her nose and continues to lie there, stubbornly committed to remaining muscle-free.

Johnny doesn't stomp away, but only because he doesn't want to give her the satisfaction. He walks, very measured and calm, and he doesn't kick the paint can so it goes sailing over the roof of the house. Daniel will never know how committed Johnny is to protecting his house.

Painting isn't hard, but it is boring and repetitive. After his training session earlier, Johnny was already pretty sore and this ache slowly flares up into a sharp pain every time he raises his arm, but he keeps at it, pushing through the feeling.

It takes him over two hours to finish covering the sides and back of the house with the awful dark brown. He's just finishing up when Daniel gets home.

“After yesterday, I hear noises coming from the back yard and I get nervous,” he says by way of announcing himself at the back door.

Daniel steps out onto the lawn; he glances once at the mistake of a repair job on the fence, looking baffled, and then he takes in the two in the lawn chairs and Johnny on the step ladder over by the house. Johnny meets his eyes for a second before going back to carefully finishing the area above the still-broken kitchen window.

“Okay,” says Daniel. “I think I'm caught up.”

He ambles up to the stepladder and claps a hand on one of the middle rungs, leaning and squinting up at Johnny.

“You didn't need to do this,” he says quietly.

Johnny's eyebrows pinch together, but he doesn't let himself get distracted from painting an even line. “I wanted to.” He dabs at the corner of the window frame and pauses, blinking down at him. “Don't you like it?”

“No, I – ” Daniel visibly checks himself and says, “I do. Thank you. It looks a lot better.”

Only by virtue of technicality, but Johnny doesn't want to reopen that particular debate. He scans the siding for any spots that he missed and, seeing none, carefully sets the paintbrush down. He makes his way down the ladder. Daniel doesn't move away and they end up inches apart, looking at each other warily.

“Got some big news for you,” says Daniel, searching his face still.

Johnny shifts, propping a foot against the bottom rung. “Oh, yeah?”

He nods and slides his eyes away, looking around the lawn. “Finished the job on your Golf. Figured it might look bad if we called your former employer out of the blue and told them to send someone to an autobody shop, so Joe and me dropped it off personally.”

This is the last thing he expected to hear. “You went to my old office?”

Daniel makes an easy sound, mmhmm. “They seemed – very relieved to have the car back. Apparently they hadn't heard from you all week and were starting to get nervous.” And he looks back at him, eyebrows raised.

By *nervous*, Johnny assumes he means *considering calling the cops*. It's his turn to nod, playing it cool. He goes to rub his neck for added effect, but Daniel catches his wrist before he can make contact.

“You've got paint,” he explains, turning his hand over in his own to show Johnny the patch of wet he hadn't noticed.

“Right,” he says. “Thanks – and uh, thanks for dropping the car off and fixing it and everything. You should tell me how much it costs, I can write a check.”

“That's,” Daniel notices the annoyed look he gives him, “right, yeah. I'll do that.” He sighs abruptly and drops Johnny's hand, leans his forehead against the side of the step ladder. His eyes drift mostly closed. “So. How was your – training?”

Johnny doesn't move. “It was fine. Good.” He doesn't think they should talk about it; don't cross the streams.

“Look, I think we need to talk about that,” says Daniel.

“Can you give me a shoulder rub?” asks Johnny, and this makes the other man crack his eyes open, startled. Heat rushes to his face and he continues, “I mean – it's just, with the painting and all – and, and I'll rub your shoulders too. Fair trade.”

Because Daniel must be sore after a week of work, and he looks tired, and Johnny thinks he might be good at giving shoulder massages? He's never done it before, but he's strong and very responsive to Daniel's body, so how hard can it be.

"I'm not kidding, Johnny," he says. "We're having a conversation about that guy."

Johnny pretends he doesn't hear that part, and continues watching Daniel, open and expectant and maybe kind of hopeful. The longer he does it, the more it seems to unsettle him: he's weakening. Johnny reaches up and folds a hand over the shoulder of his work shirt, giving the line of muscle there a light squeeze to demonstrate how good Johnny can be for him.

“*Okay*. Fine, for now,” says Daniel at last, looking away. He waves at Chozen and Susan. “Grab another lawn chair, I'm going to pour myself a very large margarita. You want one? Start Friday night right?”

“I can't drink,” says Johnny, and for some reason this makes Daniel's mouth twist a little before he turns and goes inside.

Chapter 39: ...

Despite his offer to trade off, Johnny ends up slumping into uselessness the moment Daniel puts his hands on his shoulders; he knows he won't be moving from his position on the ground in front of the third lawn chair anytime soon. He ducks his head and lets himself drift as Daniel works the tight ache out of his back.

He thinks he should feel weirder letting himself be touched in front of the others, but they don't act like anything freakish is going on – and why would they, he thinks with an unconvincing mental shrug. Susan is a dyke and Chozen is... something.

(Maybe Chozen is the one who is bad in bed? Since Johnny has no complaints about Daniel. Well, a person can't have everything. Damn shame, though.)

"...coming out later?" Susan is asking, and Johnny thinks she might be referring to him and Daniel both. Together, like one affects the other.

"No, don't think so," says Daniel, which doesn't really clear things up, but it doesn't matter because Johnny isn't going out if he isn't. Daniel doesn't have to work tomorrow. Johnny wants to see what he plans to do with all that time.

"Oh my god, you're so boring lately."

"Boring? Who's boring?" says Daniel, and he digs his thumbs a little harder into Johnny's traps, making him clench his jaw against the low sound that wants to come out. "I'm sorry I'm working swing shifts and also dealing with three people in my house. It tends to take up a lot of my spare time."

"No need to get huffy," says Susan.

"Bad host etiquette," agrees Chozen. "Also, I am not staying in your house."

"I mean, I still go out," says Daniel, ignoring them. "I went out last weekend and – hey, Sunday, I'm attending a barbecue."

"At your sixty-something friend's place," she says. "Yeah, *super cool*."

"Ah," says Chozen suddenly, and Johnny cracks his eyes open to blink at the ground, because the guy sounds almost— "I believe I—"

“I already told Yukie you were in town,” says Daniel. Chozen says nothing, and his tone brightens noticeably, “Hey, Suze, you're invited too, if you want.”

“I'm meeting up with Ali on Sunday, actually,” she says, and Johnny raises his head and looks over at her. Daniel's hands trip with the sudden motion and go still, but don't lift.

“You still talk to Ali?” he asks. He thinks she's mentioned her before, at some point, but he can't remember exactly what she said.

Susan's expression is perfectly unreadable through her sunglasses. It's almost twilight, it's ridiculous that she's even wearing them.

“Uh. How is she?” he asks, after a weirdly long silence.

“Ali?” she says airily. “Great – engaged, actually. Nearly done with her residency. She's got the perfect life.”

He doesn't know why she sounds the way she sounds, or why Daniel and Chozen don't say anything. So he only shrugs and says honestly, “That's good.”

He looks away across the lawn, thinking about it. Yeah, that is good. Ali was a good person. She deserved a perfect life.

Daniel's hands haven't started moving again, so he nudges subtly backwards against his knee. Warm fingers press down again into his skin, and Johnny is content to drift again.

A little while later, after Susan has redone her makeup into something a lot less subtle and changed into a pink slip dress, and Chozen has muttered something cryptic about his agent and they both have left the house, Daniel asks:

“You get something to eat?” He's already moving about the kitchen, taking up an eggplant; two different colors of bell pepper; a tomato and an onion and his cutting board. Not looking at Johnny.

Johnny considers what he's eaten that day (nothing; Sensei said to put the hunger into his fighting, and he did) and says only, “I'm starving.”

Daniel nods and slices neatly into the eggplant. Johnny leans over the

half-wall above the counter and tucks his chin into his folded forearms to watch him work.

He removes the stem and quickly transforms the dark purple vegetable into a pile of wedges, which he salts heavily and sets aside before turning to the chop the onion. A sharp, stinging fragrance drifts into the air.

“I didn't realize you were training with your old teacher,” says Daniel, and Johnny blinks up from his hand's sure grip along the blade of the knife.

“Oh,” he says. “Yeah. He's the one who told me about the tournament. He's giving me another chance.”

“Another chance,” says Daniel.

The red bell pepper is next, and it sounds crisp, smells sweet. For some reason it feels at odds with the expression on Daniel's face. He isn't happy.

He tries to explain, “He was – disappointed. When I walked away last time.”

He doesn't like thinking about it: Sensei's face when he told him. *All that time and work, and for what?* If it hadn't been for Bobby standing there, he still isn't sure he could've done it.

“From what I remember about the guy, he was kind of intense,” says Daniel. “Took karate pretty seriously.”

“He did,” he confirms, more confident on this ground. He straightens up from the counter, wrapping his hands over the edge and hanging backwards from the grip. “That's why he was the best around. He took it seriously, made sure we did too.”

There was a type of death in being casual about something important, and suddenly, he wants Daniel to understand this; surely he must already understand, deep down. With the way he fights, he has to.

“It was, it was good. For someone to have expectations of us. To rise and meet those expectations. Even if it was tough – especially if it was tough.”

Daniel hefts a large, fat tomato and considers it a moment with dark, serious eyes. He reaches and twists a stove top burner on; the blue

flames unfurl instantly with soft surety, and he dangles the tomato over the heat. He rotates it slowly.

“Those expectations,” he says. “You mean that *no mercy* crap?”

Johnny reels himself back in close against the counter, eyes going between the flame and his face, but Daniel doesn't look up. He feels uneasy, either at being misunderstood or perhaps understood too well.

“I mean. That was part of it, yeah. But that, it's about survival. It's like, the world hates you, right. It's going to do whatever it can to take you down, but you're not going to let it. You fight back, you strike first, and then—”

“And then the other kid passes out from blunt force trauma to the head, and you and your buddies get your asses kicked by a nice old man who likes to garden.”

Johnny says nothing. He watches the skin of tomato go taut beneath Daniel's fingers, watches it blister and split.

Daniel switches the burner off and makes quick work in peeling the skin from the tomato. He quarters it and carefully scoops the seeds out before chopping the rest. He dries his hands on a kitchen towel before flipping it over his shoulder and turning to the salted slices of eggplant. He carries the plate over to the sink and hits the tap, starts rinsing them.

“Do you want me to leave?” is all Johnny can think to say.

Daniel shuts the tap off but doesn't turn around. If the window wasn't broken, Johnny could try to make out his expression in the dark reflection of the glass. As it is, he only has his body language to go off: the dark head bowing forward, those narrow shoulders tightening.

“I want you to tell me honestly if you still believe in all that,” he says finally. He shifts around and leans back against the sink. “If you think you have the right to shove people around. If you don't care about hurting someone.”

Johnny casts his eyes down to the counter, to the confounding piles of chopped vegetables that Daniel somehow knows to assemble into an edible meal, because Daniel knows how to do stuff like that, he knows how to live.

He could lie, he thinks.

Instead, he says, “I don't believe in anything anymore.”

He leans back over the counter on his elbows heavily, hand dragging over the back of his head. He tries very hard not to say bullshit.

“Did you know Dutch is in prison?” he asks suddenly, looking up. Daniel shakes his head, but he doesn't look surprised. “He uh, he thought his girlfriend was cheating on him with her boss. Busted into their office and – it was bad. Real bad. And Tommy, I think his wife's going to divorce him, they fight all the time. Bobby's not doing so bad, I guess. He's partner track at his dad's firm. I don't know, we don't talk so much anymore.”

“Is any of this supposed to mean something to me?” asks Daniel coolly, and Johnny nods, real quick.

“It doesn't – I don't know. It didn't seem to work,” he says. “Not like how we thought it did.”

No mercy didn't work in the office where all the rules were different, and striking first is impossible when your own mom won't look you in the eye. The world struck before he ever had a chance. He thinks it probably still works in a fight, but Johnny hasn't been fighting for a long time.

“It... didn't work. I see.” Daniel smooths the line of his eyebrow with his thumb nail, looking bothered. He opens his mouth to add something and hesitates, clearly fighting himself. Finally he drops the hand and says, too fast like he's shoving the words out before he can think better of them, “And if it had, what, it'd be fine then?” Johnny shakes his head a little, confused and uncertain. “Johnny, are you even sorry? For any of it?”

He doesn't want to think about this. He never wants to think about this. There's probably a word for someone who hurts every good person they meet. Something worse than a fuck-up. Fucking up is an action, this is something more ingrained than that. It's just in him. It is him.

Daniel is still watching him, body stiff and withholding. Johnny makes himself approach anyway, rounding the counter and crossing the small kitchen space to stand in front of him. And once he's there, he can't not crowd him a little. And once he's crowding him, he can't not take hold of his waist, because he needs the comfort of touching him to get the words out.

“I should say, for your sake,” he says unsteadily into the side of his face, eyes down so he doesn't have to see how he looks at him, “I wish you'd never met me. You seemed happy, and you were so good, and I know I kept ruining everything, every time I touched you.”

Daniel is rigid beneath his hands. But when he speaks, his voice is so soft, Johnny can't even feel the air carrying the words on his skin.

“Touching me wasn't the problem. Hitting me was.”

“I know – I know. I know.” And he repeats it a couple more times, like a new mantra. He knows and this knowledge exerts pressure on the joints of his legs, and he slides down Daniel's body to his knees before him, resisting the fumbling pull of Daniel trying to stop him. He stares up into his eyes and makes himself say it:

“I was trying to make you more like me.”

It is the worst thing he's ever done – the more he saw of Daniel back then, and the more he sees what he has become since, the more nightmarish and all-consuming the truth feels. Like, a snake thought if he cut a fork into a boy's tongue he'd suddenly understand his language, but all he got was a bloody mess.

Johnny swallows against the shame and hangs onto Daniel's hips like they are a life preserver.

“I'm sorry,” he says. “I'm so sorry.”

And Daniel's hands reach and grasp at his jaw, but – no, he can't, he has to hide his face. After a long moment, Daniel seems to accept it, because his hands go from tugging to clasping. Finally, he holds Johnny against his stomach tightly enough, he isn't sure he could pull away even if he wanted to.

Some time later, Daniel hands him a grater and a chunk of hard cheese and tells him to grate about a third of cup, so he does this until a small pile of delicate twisting strands sits before him on the board. Under Daniel's direction, he mixes the (“that's more like half a cup, but okay”) cheese in a bowl with some fine bread crumbs and chopped parsley while Daniel pours something vinegary over his pan of sauteing onions and peppers.

On the other burner, oil shimmers and races around the pan, waiting.

Johnny rinses his hands and wipes them absently dry on his shorts, watching as Daniel assembles his weird little sandwiches: a slice of ham (“mortadella”; “is that just Italian for ham?”) and a slice of provolone go between two pieces of eggplant, and the whole thing is carefully dredged in beaten egg and then Johnny's breadcrumb bowl before being laid out on the pan. A loud sizzle joins the choir of the kitchen.

He zones out a little against the counter as Daniel lays out the remaining three sandwiches, only blinking out of it when Daniel rinses his hands and dries them and then pulls him in by the wrist so he can rise up on his toes and kiss him.

“You seriously always do this much work for dinner?” he asks him a couple minutes later, eyeing the stack of dirty dishes over his shoulder.

“Eh, if it's just me here?” says Daniel, his smile growing against Johnny's jaw. “I'm more of a one-pot pasta kinda guy, actually.”

Dinner eases the sharp ache that had started to cramp his stomach, but it also makes him bizarrely tired, which is pretty lame. He has felt a growing awkwardness since Daniel hauled him up off his knees in the kitchen, and he doesn't know how to shake it off. Fucking would do it, he's pretty sure, but he keeps stifling yawns and then Daniel says he's going to read for a while, so it's clearly just not going to happen.

Daniel settles in the arm chair and reaches for his book, a different one than he'd been reading the other day. Johnny doesn't understand where he finds the time.

He looks at the sofa and decides to sit in front of Daniel's chair like he had earlier outside. And he means to switch the TV on, but the remote is over on the other side of the sofa and once he's down, he doesn't much feel like getting up again. He shifts half around and sets his cheek against the man's knee, letting his eyes close.

It's peaceful, until that knee nudges him. He grunts, irritated.

“Hey, you might be into this book, actually. You want, I could read it to you?”

“I do know how to read, you know,” he mumbles.

“Happy for you,” says Daniel blithely. His knee nudges him again. Annoying. So Johnny wraps his arm around his calf and locks the leg down. “Okay, so I'm gonna read aloud.”

“Can't stop you,” he says, and he shuts his eyes again to hide his relief.

Daniel starts a little stiff and halting, but this melts away soon enough, and then so does the meaning of the words, their edges and spaces. Eventually all Johnny is left with is his voice, dark and warm and perfectly steady.

In formal beds beside the Serpentine, early tulips stood in tight-lipped rows. Billy Prior spent several moments setting up an enfilade, then, releasing his companion's arm, seized an imaginary machine-gun and blasted the heads off the whole bloody lot of them.

Myra stared in amazement. 'You barmy bugger.'

He shook his head sadly. 'Five months in a loony bin last year.'

'Go on.'

She didn't believe him, of course.

Chapter 40: Kata and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Daniel wakes up to an empty bed.

He stirs and slides his hand over and is met with nothing but cool sheets. He opens his eyes, raises his head and blinks around the room. It's early still, but there's no sign of any tow-headed ex-bully eager to suck his dick. He frowns.

Out in the hallway, the bathroom door is closed and he can hear the shower running. He weighs the situation for about five seconds: his bladder, the likely occupant of the shower. He shrugs and shoulders inside.

He's barely let loose with great relief when the shower curtain rattles a little and Susan pokes her head free, dripping and cross.

“What the hell, Daniel?”

“Oh, sorry,” he says, because jeez. “Figured you were Johnny.”

He pauses and, figuring the damage is already done, furtively continues pissing. She makes a sound of deep disgust and slaps the curtain closed again.

“What time you get back, anyway?” he calls over the spitting of the shower. “Musta been late! Have you considered that you're maybe drinking a little too much? Have you considered that maybe the best revenge you could get on Marty would be actually taking care of yourself? Have you—”

“Have you considered *minding your own fucking business*?” she shouts. “Jesus. *Why* doesn't your bathroom door lock.”

His brow pinches and he shakes off, tucks himself back into his pajama pants. “Hey, it's on my list. I'll get around to fixing that soon.”

He turns and checks his reflection in the mirror: eh. He runs his hands back through his hair a couple times. Better. He rub his hands over his upper arms, but there's nothing he can really do about that. Oh well. Visual check complete.

“You know, you could just have gone outside,” she continues,

sounding sorely tried.

“Outside?” he says, incredulous. “It's my damn house. I'm not going to go piss in my backyard like a dog.”

“Chozen and Johnny both did.”

“Whatever,” he mutters, and he leaves the bathroom. He wonders where Johnny is – he didn't say anything about training today. He hopes he's not training; he was so sore and tired the day before. But Daniel wouldn't put anything past that Kreese guy.

He wanders grumpily down the hall and turns into the kitchen and stops short, blinking at the butch sitting there. They're tiny and freckled and a complete stranger, he's pretty sure. God, what next. She can't stay.

“Who're you?” he asks.

She drums her palms lightly atop the kitchen table, mouth flattening and stretching into a tight smile. “Um. Beck?”

“Uh huh.”

He wanders around the counter, reaching for the coffee maker – there's already a pot made. He decides he likes Beck – but she still can't stay. No way. The neighbors will start talking, and it takes something truly heinous for that group to get together and make actual conversation. Last time Mrs. Kislak spoke to Mr. Sanches was when a sinkhole opened in the middle of the street, and even then it was just to complain about the work crew who came to fix it. (Took six months to get the thing fixed! Nice to see where their tax dollars are going, that's for damn sure.)

“Say, Beck – you see a guy in here at all?” he asks, turning around with his filled mug to meet the eyes of the surprised woman.

Her eyes dart around the kitchen and she looks a little nervous. “You mean, like. Right now?”

“What?” he says, confused. “No – earlier. Yea high, sandy blond hair? Maybe he acted weird and it was either kinda cute or really unsettling or somehow both? No?”

She shakes her head slightly. “I – you know, I just. I actually just got up—”

“Hm,” he says and he sips his coffee.

He puts his head to the side and considers her. Her eyes crawl away and return, checking. Her tapping increases. Nails now. He needs to save this poor girl; Susan will eat her alive, and then beat herself up over it. No good. She'll never leave his house then. They'll still be together at seventy; he can already hear her complaining about his homemade pasta sticking in her dentures.

“You know, I'm pretty sure Susan's hiding in the bathroom,” he tells her. The tapping stops. “Yeah, I don't think she's coming out any time soon – please don't take it personally,” he adds hastily. “She's just got a bad personality!”

Beck stands, and okay, she's not that small. Might even be close to his height, who's to say without them standing back-to-back, and he doesn't usually pull that party trick out unless he's very drunk.

“Hey, how tall are you, would you say?” he asks with bright curiosity.

“I think I'm just going to go,” she says.

So she leaves and Daniel drinks the rest of his coffee. Susan comes out a couple minutes later, her hair wrapped in a towel and a full face of make-up on.

“Where's Beth?” she asks.

“Beck.”

“Yeah, whatever. Where'd she go?”

He feels pretty confident he has done right by the universe, no regrets. “I didn't see anybody, they must've already left – hey, trade you. You see Johnny around at all?”

Susan sits at the table in the seat Beck had been occupying, looking dispirited. At his question, she looks up at him. “Aw, no, I haven't. Why, he run away? Do you need help putting up posters around the neighborhood?”

No regrets whatsoever.

“You know how I said you were too young for a mid-life crisis?” he

asks an hour or so later out in front of his house. “I've changed my mind.”

“What are you talking about?” asks Johnny, who has bought himself a motorcycle.

It's big and yellow and Johnny looks obscenely good straddling it: denim taut over his spread thighs, Daniel's blue Valley Fest Chili Cook-Off tee tight around his biceps. He grips the handlebars and smirks over at Daniel like he's done it all on purpose just for him.

Daniel puts a hand on his hip and chews his lip. “It's just not exactly the most practical purchase – how much did you drop on that, anyway? You can't even carry groceries in it.”

“You think someone should choose their ride based on what groceries they can haul?” asks Johnny blankly, like it's the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard.

“Well, I mean. Not *just* groceries—”

“And I bought it used,” he continues. He looks down, and he couldn't look more satisfied at what's between his legs right now if it was Daniel himself, Daniel's pretty sure. “Anyway, the only thing it needs to carry is you.”

“Say what?” says Daniel.

Johnny jerks his head. “Hop on.”

“Uh.” He laughs shortly. “Yeah, no. I don't think so.”

Johnny bounces in place restlessly. His hands flex over the handlebars and it makes his arms look really good, it's so awful. Daniel wants to climb him like a tree, and he knows, he just knows if he gets on that bike he's going to start thinking about fucking on it, and just – no. No! He refuses to be drawn in like a blushing girl getting cruised by a *cool* guy in a *hot* ride. He is above that. He's no traitor; the lines drawn in high school last forever. Death to Hills jocks and their damn toys.

“C'mon,” says Johnny, and like, he's not even being sweet about it; he sounds a little impatient, actually. Outrageous. “Let's go for a spin. You'll love it.”

“That's really not,” Daniel begins, but Johnny interrupts flatly:

“Look, I bought a second helmet.”

They stare at each other. And the trouble is, Daniel's not as good at the whole staring thing. Sometimes when Johnny stares, it's like he flips on all the lights and then lets himself quietly out the back. He can go forever, basically.

You let a guy stay in your house and sleep in your bed and give him a few orgasms and cook him food and he starts acting all demanding, like he's got some kind of claim to your time and attention. It never really occurred to Daniel there could be a downside to spoiling someone; who'd a thought? And like, maybe Daniel wanted to get some things done today instead of dying in a fiery crash on the highway, did Johnny ever think of that?

(He is almost positive he could fit in between Johnny and the handlebars. And Johnny's legs can reach the ground to steady the bike, so Daniel could straddle the seat backwards and maybe they could be naked and he could jerk them both off at the same time and it's really nothing they couldn't do in the safety and comfort of his bed, except that's not the point. The point is Daniel could fit between Johnny and the handlebars.)

Johnny is still staring at him.

“Jesus, fine!” says Daniel, throwing his hands up and stepping forward. “Man, you'll do anything to get me behind you, huh.”

He lifts the helmet off the seat and awkwardly swings his leg over the bike. He figures out where to place his feet and he still doesn't like how unstructured it all feels. He scoots in close to Johnny until their thighs are pressed together, and that's a little better; Johnny drops a hand to his bare knee very briefly and squeezes it, and that's not making Daniel feel any less like a good girl making a bad choice. Tom Petty warned him about this kind of thing.

Disgruntled, Daniel settles the helmet over his head and then is stuck not being able to properly inspect the situation anymore because it kills most of his peripheral vision, even with the visor open.

“There a seatbelt or something back here?” he asks.

Johnny turns his head to the side and says, “I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that.”

Daniel looks up from craning his neck over the side of the machine,

meaning to reply with something cutting, but he gets stuck staring at the pinkpink*pink* of the back of Johnny's neck. Yeah, he really likes having Daniel behind him, crotch snug up against his ass. (Either that or he's already got a sunburn. Maybe Daniel should run inside and grab some sunscreen. Another reason motorcycles aren't practical: no protection from the elements.)

Johnny turns the motorcycle on, and Daniel tries not to twitch at the loud rumble of it beneath them. This is such a bad idea, he thinks uneasily. This is such—

Johnny guns it and Daniel throws himself at his back, arms locking tight around his waist as he holds on for dear life. He thinks he can hear Johnny laugh over the roar of the engine; he knows he can feel it through his ribs.

Johnny takes it easy on him at first and doesn't head directly for the freeway. Instead they make their way lazily south through the valley, winding up the Santa Monica mountains and back down though narrow, winding canyon streets. Daniel slowly relaxes. Feeling gradually returns to his terror-stiff arms and hopefully to Johnny's abdomen.

He pays attention, learning from Johnny how and when to lean on turns, and it becomes almost fun. It's hard not to absorb the confident ease of Johnny's body and respond accordingly; it's hard not to feel safe. Bad things couldn't possibly happen to this guy, he's unstoppable.

Johnny must feel when he loosens up; while coasting down a deserted street, throttle low, he drops his left hand to his leg, tucking his fingers beneath the crook of his knee. Daniel assumes they're doing something wordlessly flirty and rubs his thumb against Johnny's navel – and then yelps a little as Johnny suddenly speeds up, racing up and over the rolling street.

They fly over a rise and land, jouncing. Daniel curses loudly enough for Johnny to hear; the man's only response is to squeeze and slap his thigh cheerfully. So, still a bit of a bully. Daniel hugs close sulkily.

They meet the 405 off Sunset Blvd and all bets are off; Johnny takes the road like all the other vehicles on it are nothing more than stationary obstacles in his way, like they are the only two real people in the world. Daniel goes back to clutching him in terror as they speed

around buses and trucks and shoot up between passing cars. Lanes become parochial concepts. Lines are mere suggestions, far beneath the fine artistry of this motorcyclist.

It's early afternoon on a Saturday in the summer, and the traffic slows to a standstill a few miles out from the pier – except traffic jams do not exist in Johnny Lawrence's world, oh no. He deigns to slow down, but only so he can start weaving between and across the creeping rows of cars, alternating in walking and accelerating, taking any opening he spies.

It's absolutely unsafe; it's probably illegal; it's completely dickish, and it's too damn fun. They get more than one horn blaring after them. Daniel catches a couple flipped birds and it turns out he can't help himself; he waves cheerily back every time.

They park as close to the boardwalk as they can – easier with a motorcycle, he'll allow. Daniel climbs off the bike, lifts the helmet and stands there on jittery legs, staring at Johnny repressively.

“What?” is all he says, nonplussed.

Daniel rolls his eyes and tugs at his road-warmed arm. “C'mon, you lunatic. I need a breather after all that.”

Johnny seems perfectly happy to be towed along the boardwalk in the sun, hands stuffed into his pockets. He's quietly attentive as Daniel rambles and points things out from the passing stalls or people playing down in the surf. He seems content.

It's impossible to find a private spot down on the beach itself, so they settle for a free patch of sand. Daniel flops down on his back, putting his hands behind his head. Johnny stretches out beside him on his stomach, resting up on his elbows. His eyelashes look especially long and pale in the sunlight, limned with tawny gold as he looks down at Daniel. If not for the black eye, he'd be perfect. As it is, he's merely beautiful.

Daniel rolls his head in the cradle of his hands, closing one eye. “We should've brought sunglasses, huh.”

Johnny's mouth flickers in an acknowledging smile, but he doesn't say anything. They watch each other for a while, until something starts to

stir in Daniel's stomach. Nerves, or something. He thinks he knows what's happening, and there's no stopping it, not this time. He figures he's pretty doomed. But it's too hot out to worry or do anything about it right now.

“Hey, you ever do kata?” he asks.

Chapter 41: On a Small Patch of Ground Just For Them

Johnny rests his arms on his crooked knees, digs his bare feet into the almost-too-hot sand and looks up at Daniel skeptically.

“It looks like a good way to work up a sweat,” he says, though he can think of plenty better ways – like fighting, or fucking, or really just anything that involves two people actually touching. “But what use is it in a fight?”

Daniel sighs and exchanges his ready position for his hips. “Why does it have to be useful for *a fight*?”

“Because... it's karate?” he says. “If it's not useful in a fight, then you're basically just doing – Tae Bo.”

Daniel's mouth drops open, and it's pretty funny.

“Kata teaches form control and centeredness,” he says primly. Johnny flexes his toes idly through the sand and wrinkles his nose; he squints. “Hey! *You* were the one who was so blown away by my moves the other night.”

“Yeah, true.” He pushes up to his feet and dusts the sand off his jeans. He smirks at him and spreads his arms. “But I'm starting to think maybe I imagined the whole thing? Y'know, I'd had a few drinks, it was kind of late—”

Daniel doesn't move, but he does look at Johnny suspiciously. “If you are trying to goad me into a fight, that's not going to work.”

Johnny steps around him casually, tracks in the sand behind him delineating a flirtatious semi-circle. He glances down and up again at Daniel, checking. His eyebrows arch a little, innocently doubtful.

“I mean it,” says Daniel. “I don't care if you think I can fight good or whatever.”

“You sure about that?” asks Johnny, and he mimes a punch, slow and heavy in the telegraphing. His fist is slapped down and he grins hard. “C'mon.”

Daniel shakes his head, trying to maintain a stony face, but Johnny

can see right through it. That's a smile threatening the corner of his mouth. And no one actually angry rolls his eyes this much; he can barely look at Johnny. Johnny knows this because he's still circling, and Daniel keeps turning his head to look the other way, like maybe if he doesn't see it, it's not happening. Like that's ever worked.

“C'mon, you know you want to,” he says, and he feints again.

Daniel jumps up, his legs scissoring around Johnny's to send him tumbling to the ground; Johnny catches himself and automatically twists to the side to avoid a hit that wasn't coming anyway. He springs up onto his knees. They look at each other across the two feet of disturbed sand, and it's like there's nobody else in the whole world.

“What?” says Daniel eventually, attention flicking over him, alert. “You're not still wondering if I can take you in a fight, are you?”

He's pretty sure Daniel's whiz-kid skills still wouldn't be enough to take him down, actually. Johnny hasn't lost a proper fight since he was fourteen. (The bout with Chozen was totally a draw.) He could probably beat him – but he thinks maybe he doesn't really want to, and that feels weird but good.

“Nah,” he says, shifting around to sit crosslegged.

Daniel pauses for a long moment and then stretches out towards him on his stomach, tanned limbs sprawling easily. He tunnels his fingers into the sand and finds Johnny's down there, makes a connection. He looks up at him with warm eyes.

“So,” he says brightly. “You wanna try kata?”

Johnny hesitates. Suddenly, mixing Daniel and karate seems like a bad idea – like tempting fate, or something. And Daniel doesn't like fighting, so why push? The only way this works is if he keeps it all separate. If James Bond followed his lead, a lot more Bond girls would still be alive, he figures. Good spy, shitty lover.

Johnny lifts one shoulder. “Maybe some other time.”

Daniel nods, and if he looks a little disappointed, well. That's just how it goes sometimes when you're with a spy.

They lie around on the beach for a while longer, not doing much of anything except looking at each other and, Johnny is pretty sure, thinking about what they could be doing if they weren't in public. It's

a novelty to Johnny, who isn't used to anticipation with a guarantee of any kind of follow-through. He is unfamiliar with this lazy stirring of blood, with letting himself look; letting himself notice another looking back. Daniel makes it easy, though.

“Can I ask you something?” he says abruptly. And when Daniel hums and nods, he asks, “Does your work know about you?”

Daniel doesn't need to ask what he is referring to. “Yeah. When I bought into the place, I told them. Didn't want it blowing up in my face later.”

“And they're just – what, cool with it?” It feels impossible.

Daniel shrugs. “I don't know, define cool? Joe doesn't care, but then it's not like I'm bringing people around to remind him. A couple of the boys on the crew call me Gay Dan, but I guess that feels more like standard shit talk than anything too bad. We can still work together and they're not flinching away or anything like that.”

Johnny tries to picture how his office would've handled him, if anyone had known the truth. Then he finds he doesn't want to picture it and stops real quick.

Daniel eyes him. “What about you?”

His eyes flick up, wary. “What about me?”

Daniel hesitates and then sits up, dragging his long, sand-dusted legs into compliance. His expression flickers, like he's trying to choose his words very carefully, and Johnny watches this procession of consideration with curiosity.

“Your – sensei, he didn't uh, seem exactly shocked yesterday. Or maybe his powers of observation are lacking and he didn't connect the dots, I don't—”

“No, he knows about me,” says Johnny.

Daniel stops. “Right.”

He looks down. “I think he's always known, probably. But yeah, before, he – there was another fighter training at our gym and he. Anyway, he actually was the one who told my mom about me.”

Down on the sand, Daniel's fingers go rigid against his ankles, the tips

bleaching.

“Not that my stepdad hadn't already guessed,” he says after a moment. “But you know, it's different. Getting confirmation.”

“Why would he—”

“He was just trying to help me,” says Johnny quickly, glancing up. “People like – straight people, they don't get it, you know? They think love is a choice, right? And so like, he probably thought, what kind of mom would, would choose *not* to—”

Daniel's hands land on his own, hot and rough. He has sat forward, hovering on his shins, and he doesn't sink back down until Johnny makes himself look up and meet his eyes.

“Why the hell would you go back to him?” asks Daniel quietly.

“Because that doesn't matter – doesn't change anything now. No, look,” he says, because he can tell Daniel doesn't get it.

He pulls his hand away from beneath Daniel's so he can rake his hair back from his forehead and rub his face. He tries to think.

A volleyball lands a few feet away, and Johnny glances around, spots the laughing woman running towards them. He climbs forward onto his knees and snags the ball; tosses it in the air and serves it sailing back to her. She jumps and catches it and waves a bright *thanks!* and he sits back down.

Daniel is still waiting.

“Look, I won, right? Three-time All Valley Champion, never been done before, and then Nationals, and – and a fucking Pay-Per-View fight with fucking ESPN? I did everything my sensei told me, and it turned out – it still wasn't enough. The world was still – it was all I had, everything was banking on it. And it wasn't enough.” He shrugs tightly. “Being good at this one thing, even though it was the *most important thing*. It wasn't enough to make up for the rest of me. So, y'know – I walked.”

He looks down again, away from Daniel's terrible gaze. He runs his tongue over his molars and forces the words to continue.

“I tried – I tried making it work, the way everyone said it was supposed to. Tried fixing the wrong parts. I got the job and I put on

the right face for it, and I tried for years. But that didn't work either. Felt like I was losing everything else, like there was just nothing left."

For as long as he lives, however long that might be, his mom will never hug him again. Worse than this is knowing he was never really held by her in the first place; that his old memories are an illusion at best – an outright lie on his bad days. Because real love isn't a choice. You can't yank yourself away from it, if it's real. And what kind of person isn't loved by his own mother?

Johnny is just so tired.

"It means something to me, that John Kreese reached out," he says clearly. "After all this time. That my old teacher, this guy who's known me since I was a kid, that he thought of me, that he still believes I can do this."

Daniel has his knuckles smashed up against his mouth, and he's chewing the skin lightly as he thinks. His dark eyes are narrowed, brow pinched.

"But you said, it didn't work back then," he says finally. "Aren't you just putting yourself back in the same position to be disappointed? No?" he presses, when Johnny shakes his head firmly. "How not, Johnny? How is fighting in some tournament going to magically fix everything when it didn't eight or whatever years ago?"

"Because I'm with you now," says Johnny.

Daniel drops his hand from his mouth and stares at him.

"I mean, right?" he adds with a trace of doubt. "It feels right. Doesn't it?" And Johnny needs him to agree, because Johnny is tired.

"Will you freak if I hug you in public?" asks Daniel.

He blinks and shakes his head mutely.

Daniel comes over him slow like a sunburn, his smaller chest pressing against Johnny's, his back solid beneath his surprised hands. He makes it so simple; this isn't something Johnny would have guessed was possible five seconds ago and now, here it is. A thing his body can experience and do, just like everyone else.

Johnny shifts his chin over the other man's shoulder, thinking. "Hey, do you think this is what that was about back in school? Like maybe

this whole time, that's what I actually wanted? With the fight, I mean."

Daniel's whole body twitches against him in a weird hiccup-laugh. "Yeah. Yeah, maybe."

He narrows his eyes at the rolling ocean. "Is... this what you wanted me to figure out for myself?"

Daniel's hand comes up to clasp the side of his face: perhaps a placeholder touch until he can replace it with a kiss?

"Close enough," says Daniel.

Chapter 42: How to Spend a Saturday

Chapter Summary

story accompaniment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's not a bad way to spend a Saturday.

Johnny thinks he could probably lie here forever. He can't remember the last time he came down to the beach. He doesn't know why he ever stopped, except – of course, he does. Some things feel and sound so different when you're alone. Right now, listening to the ocean and the raucous sounds of the crowd, he doesn't feel cut off or shut out from the people all around them. He's barely aware of himself at all.

Eventually, Daniel pops his head up beside him and peers at him with a frown. Johnny raises an eyebrow and frowns exaggeratedly back. What?

Then Daniel starts muttering about sunburns like a complete nerd and gets up. He lightly kicks sand at Johnny and tugs on his wrist until he gets reluctantly to his feet too, and they leave the beach.

They decide to get lunch. Johnny half-expects Daniel to find some fancy gourmet place, since he's so particular and all, but they just end up at a burger stand a couple blocks away: the type of place that prices for tourists and cooks for no one.

Johnny squints at Daniel across the umbrella'd picnic table. “So you're not always picky about food,” he says.

Daniel shrugs. “Hey, not my responsibility, not my problem.” He swipes a bouquet of soggy crinkle-cut fries through some ketchup and pauses. “I mean, if I'm cooking, yeah, I'm going to do it right – no point in not, I'm already doing the work.”

Johnny takes a bite of his burger and chews on this. “Thought you said when it's just yourself, you don't put too much effort in.”

Daniel's eyes come up first, then the corners of his mouth. He points across the table. “Full points for listening, but half a point off for

conjecture."

He doesn't know what conjecture is, but who cares because, "You scoring me now?"

He can't decide if he finds the idea extremely appealing or really stressful. If it's points like in a sport, Johnny's gonna do great, but if it's more like points on a test, less great – probably bad, in fact? He wonders if Daniel would grade him on a curve. He never actually knew what that meant in school, but most people seemed to be in favor of it, except if they were in a class with someone like Ali for some reason.

"*No*," says Daniel meanwhile, half-laughing down at his food. "I could never, they'd call me out for points inflation! I'd be thrown out for corruption and favoritism. Think of the ethics involved."

This is all complete nonsense, standard LaRusso chatter, but Johnny *is* pretty sure he basically just said Johnny was his favorite? And then his foot finds Johnny's beneath the table and clasps their ankles together. Johnny takes another bite of his burger and tries to ignore the warmth in his face. He probably has a sunburn after all.

Daniel eyes him knowingly. He eats a couple more fries and leans over the table like he's sharing a secret; his voice turns hushed and this seems like a good enough excuse for Johnny to lean forward as well.

"Look, if you need points to figure out if you're doing good," says Daniel, slow and deliberate: his mouth hooking up into a smile. "Then I've failed you."

Johnny's brow pinches. "I don't think you can," he says after a moment, because that's not how any of this works, he's pretty sure.

Daniel's smile quiets into something quizzical. Then he abruptly waves a hand and gathers his crumb-and-grease-spotted paper wrapper, crushing it into a ball. Below, his foot drags a few inches up Johnny's calf before tapping once, twice.

"Let's hope I never prove you wrong," is all he says, and he stands to throw the wrapper away, leaving Johnny to finish his burger and look after him in confusion.

It's not a bad way to spend a Saturday.

They walk around downtown Santa Monica for a while, wandering the pedestrian mall beneath the welcome canopy shade of the jacaranda trees.

Johnny points out a bookstore as they pass it, but this is dismissed for reasons unknown – they pass another and Daniel immediately drags him inside, saying it'll *only be ten minutes, I swear*; forty pass before Johnny looks up from his karate magazine to find Daniel standing before him, sheepish and holding a bag containing three books.

Several clothing stores have their doors open and racks out on the sidewalk, and Daniel insists on stopping at every single one, making a game of lifting shirts to Johnny's chest and scrutinizing them.

“Uh, this isn't a game,” says Daniel, exchanging the shirt in his hand for a grey V-neck. The rack rattles. “You need shirts, man.”

“I don't need *that*,” says Johnny, because he thinks if the V was any deeper it'd reach his belly button. Weird. No way.

“Okay, how about this one?” he asks ten minutes later, shaking a pale green short-sleeved button-down in his face.

“I don't know,” says Johnny, leaning back. He blinks at the faint pattern on the fabric. “Fine, I guess?”

“You guess? C'mon, what's not to like?” Daniel turns the shirt around to frown at it, like maybe it has a large stain on the front he hadn't noticed. “I think it'd look real nice.”

Johnny pauses, thinking. He shrugs and leans in close as he steps past Daniel.

“Maybe if you wore it first,” he says into his ear, and he ambles away to sprawl on one of the fountain benches in the middle of the promenade. The sun feels pleasantly warm after the shade. He puts his head back and closes his eyes.

Daniel buys the shirt.

It's not a bad way to spend a Saturday.

“Oh, here we go,” says Johnny, and it's his turn to yank Daniel along; he's not so good at doing this gently. Daniel's eyes shoot wide in alarm and he stumbles a little after him.

“Jesus, feel like a damn cartoon character,” he says just inside the music store. He rubs his arm and makes a disgruntled face up at him. “Swear my feet practically flew in the air behind me.”

“Your music collection needs work,” says Johnny decisively. But he feels a little embarrassed about his enthusiasm and decides to cover by ruffling Daniel's hair roughly before moving deeper into the store.

“My music collection is just fine,” calls Daniel at his back, but he seems to dive down the rows of albums happily enough.

Daniel's current set-up isn't equipped for CDs, and Johnny figures he should fix that eventually but maybe not today. Everything is available on tape anyway and tapes take up less space, which is something he supposes Daniel might care about – or should given the size of his living room.

He grabs a few staples, basic things he still can't believe Daniel doesn't already own – and seriously, what kind of music has Susan brought to the house? Clearly she's unreliable too.

The pile grows: *Appetite for Destruction, Use Your Illusion I* and *II, 3.V, The Razors Edge, The Wall, Pyromania, Hysteria,* and sure, Johnny already owns most of these, but he thinks Daniel should have a copy, just in case.

He zones out for a while, drifting down the rows. His fingers walk a flicking path through band after band and album after album. Sometimes he hears something in his head, sometimes not; sometimes he is curious enough to set a cassette aside.

He is almost surprised when he meets up with Daniel again, blinking away from the stack of new releases to look over and meet his amused eyes.

Daniel glances down to the pile of tapes in the wire basket on the floor. His eyebrows rise. “You're not getting all those, are you?”

“Hey, check this out,” says Johnny instead of responding. He reaches to unhook a pair of headphones from the wall. “They let you listen to some of the newer albums before you buy.”

Daniel is still looking at the basket of tapes, so Johnny stretches the headphones over his head. The other man jerks, hands coming up in surprise because he hadn't been listening. He glowers; Johnny smirks slightly before putting his own pair on and turning his attention to the wall of options.

“Pick something nice, will you,” says Daniel, poking his side.

Just for that, Johnny selects something called Napalm Death.

Heavy guitars instantly crash through the headphones. He fights to maintain a neutral expression.

“Uh, yeah,” starts Daniel loudly, “I don't think this,” and then the hoarse roaring starts and he actually winces. He leans over the racks of vinyls to read the album cover on display. “*Fear Emptiness Despair*,” he reads. He looks back at Johnny. “Yeah? Uh huh? You enjoying this?”

Johnny sticks it out. He even nods his head a little, though if there's a beat here he can't actually pick it out. The shouting is still going; it might never stop? If someone was able to record the inside of someone's head while he was simultaneously having a heart attack *and* a mental breakdown while *also* fleeing the raiding party of some radioactive mutant zombies, it might sound something like this, he thinks.

“It's super cool,” he says. Daniel only shakes his head and stabs a button. Blissful silence descends and he doesn't sigh in relief but it's a near thing. “Okay, fine. You pick, then.”

“Oh, I will,” says Daniel, and he spends maybe ten seconds scanning the album covers before he brightens and punches the button above the new Beastie Boys.

“No,” says Johnny, after about ten seconds.

His mouth drops open in outrage. “What? Why? You've barely given it a chance.”

Johnny leans against the rack. “Scrawny, loud-mouthed East-coasters blabbing in my ear?” he says. “I got you for that.”

“Oh, yeah?” And Daniel steps up to him like he wants to square off or something – *him*. Ha. So this is definitely maybe flirting, Johnny's pretty sure.

He lightly hip-checks Daniel aside and snakes a hand forward to choose a different album. Stone Temple Pilots, they can be pretty unobjectionable. Daniel must agree, because he listens to a song the whole way through. He shifts close until their sides brush, the sun-warmed heat of his bare shoulder against Johnny's upper arm.

Johnny's grin gradually fades and he ducks his head, eyes on the silver-white edges of the CD stacks facing out from the wall beneath the listening post. He thought listening to the music would be the same as in a car or Daniel's living room, but it's not. It feels different knowing they hear the same song: the two of them and no one else.

He doesn't say anything when Daniel makes his next pick, though there's plenty he could say – *no* again, because Daniel seems to like his musicians dweeby. Like, who the hell are these guys and why are they even on display alongside actual bands? No way they ever make another album.

He glances to the side to meet Daniel's waiting, expectant gaze and tries to communicate these thoughts with just his face. But Daniel must not be able to read his face because his own only creases in amusement.

“This is the future,” he tells Johnny, obnoxiously authoritative. “This right here, I'm telling you. Sound of the nineties.” And when Johnny shakes his head, he persists, “C'mon, are you kidding me? Haven't you heard these guys on the radio? They're playing everywhere.”

“This isn't rock, it's like – chick music,” says Johnny.

“Chick music?” echoes Daniel. “Well, I'm not a chick, and I like it.”

“Yeah, but you're like an honorary chick.” Johnny pauses, eyes dipping; he amends, “an honorary chick with a very nice dick.”

Daniel's surprised laugh briefly blots out the nasal crooning of this Weezer asshole, and Johnny takes advantage of the other man's distraction to pick another album.

“How about this, I bet you love this one too,” he says, and he twists the volume dial because he thinks he remembers this song starts kinda quiet, just a piano and the woman.

Daniel's expression smooths over. “I do, actually. Because I'm a human, and I have a heart as well as a nice dick.” His eyes narrow and he tilts his head, shifting in close to stare Johnny down in challenge.

“And I think you do too, because I gotta say, Johnny, you were pretty quick in finding this track.”

Shit. If Daniel was anyone else, Johnny would cover by saying something like, *well, Chrissie Hynde is pretty hot.* He knows being out has a lot of down sides but this particular one stings.

Johnny glances up from the compressed row of vinyls, still trying to think of a reasonable response, and his eyes shoot wide in panic, because Daniel is suddenly lip-syncing the chorus at him with gusto. Jesus. It's like he doesn't realize there are people all around.

Johnny tries to step away, but he's still wearing the headphones and the cord pulls taut; they slide roughly over his ears. He reaches to haul them off, but Daniel grabs his wrist and stops him from escaping. He leans out, really putting his back into the performance: *I'll stand by—*

Johnny frantically stabs for a new album.

Daniel lets his air mic drop to his side, unimpressed. “You know, Johnny, you're no fun.”

“Did I say I was sorry for shoving you around back in the day?” he asks. “Well, I changed my mind. You had it coming. Totally.”

Daniel rolls his eyes and turns to face the rest of the store, leaning back against the rack beside him and crossing his arms. He says, almost like he's speaking to himself:

“You're just jealous because I'm a natural-born performer.” And then, louder: “Okay, okay, Mr. Manly Music Taste. Final pick, I won't even look. Hit me with your best shot.”

“Makes you Pat Benatar,” he says absently, already looking through the remaining options. “Another chick.”

“You know what this is?” says Daniel thoughtfully. “I've given it some consideration—”

“What, like. In the past three minutes?” he asks, puzzled; distracted.

“—and I've decided what you're obviously trying to do here is provoke a response from me. I see right through you, man. These little antics of yours. It's cute. You think, oh, insult his manhood enough and he'll have to really *prove* it to me—”

Johnny's face wrinkles. “Honest, I just think your taste sucks?”

“—but you don't gotta worry, Johnny.”

He pauses, finger hovering over the selection button for the album he wants. He gives Daniel a wary look, but Daniel is still idly observing the rest of the room. He has one foot crossed over the other, his fingers drumming the side of the vinyl rack.

“What don't I have to worry about?” he asks, a little worried. He presses the button and turns to match Daniel's position, back to the listening post.

They let the song carry them forth, and Johnny hopes Daniel feels at least a little like he does hearing it: the immediate driving energy in the guitar and joining percussion, how it makes everything feel easier, better. More possible.

The chorus hits, and he can tell Daniel hasn't heard the song before because his whole chest hitches in a slight laugh. But he's not laughing when he turns and looks at Johnny. And if it felt private to listen to the same song on headphones together, it's almost unbearable to do it while Daniel is looking at him. His eyes ask too much, and even the question feels like a risk to Johnny, but he can't not respond, maybe. He wants to respond.

Daniel looks like he wants to kiss him; Johnny is pretty sure he recognizes the expression now. He glances away and back, and the music is forever, and he lets his hand creep over at their backs to touch Daniel's fingers curled over the edge of the shelf.

“Wait,” he says abruptly, when the song has ended and Daniel is putting the headphones back on the wall. “What don't I have to worry about?”

Daniel bends and snags the basket of cassette tapes, and if he thinks he's going to buy those, Johnny will have to sweep his leg or something drastic.

“Nothing, Johnny,” says Daniel. He smiles at him and nudges his hip with his arm. “But let's go home, hey?”

And it hadn't been a bad way to spend a Saturday, but suddenly Johnny thinks there's something even better out there.

Chapter End Notes

I have to acknowledge the historical inaccuracy, sorry:
* The Pretenders "Last of the Independents" album did not come out in the US until July of 1994; maybe Stand By You was on the radio before then? idk.

Chapter 43: Closer and Closer

He doesn't take the same route home. He wants to see what this bike can do, and he wants Daniel to see it too.

Way back when Daniel was doing his best to be a bouncy walking-talking nightmare intent on fucking with Johnny's world, he cracked a joke about exactly this: them on a bike together. He probably doesn't remember it; why would he. But Johnny remembers everything Daniel has ever said to him. The airy way he talked about it, rendering the idea both conceivable but inherently ridiculous. An impossible temptation followed by a stinging slap. And, of course, of course, the unforgettable and echoing *you're not my type*.

It's good he changed his mind, Johnny thinks as Daniel's arms tighten around his middle.

The heavy weekend traffic congesting the Pacific Coast Highway around Santa Monica can't stop them, and every squeeze and noise of alarm his passenger makes only pushes Johnny to go further: more daring moves, more outrageous flouting of the rules of the road. If the universe thought they should be stuck in traffic behind a Camry, he figures, it wouldn't have given Johnny the reflexes to dodge around?

“I'd like to not die, please,” Daniel shouts behind him.

“Hey, me too,” Johnny shouts brightly over his shoulder, and the great thing is, he really means it.

Along the at-grade open lanes beneath the terracing bluffs of Palisades Park they snake, too fast for the world to touch. The buildings drop away first from the left and then the right, until there is only coast and sky, the road before them.

Johnny opens up the throttle, and Daniel's knees pinch around him. And this is why he knows the bike was a great idea, maybe the best idea he's ever had. Beyond the immediacy of the road is the undeniability of Daniel at his back: Daniel, who has to hang on, has no other choice but to hold him – and Johnny doesn't even have to worry about responding in a pleasing way, he just has to make sure they don't crash.

“Oh my god,” says Daniel, after Johnny finally turns off the highway onto a promising two-lane canyon road somewhere in Eastern Malibu.

“You know, I've long suspected you were insane?”

Except he is half-hard against Johnny's hip, and as soon as they hit a spot of lighter traffic, his hand briefly unlatches from his waist and drops to curl around the upper inside of his thigh, fingers brushing the inseam inches from his cock. Johnny had hoped it would be only a matter of time before he helped himself out; another reason the bike was a great choice. He could drive and be completely open for him at the same time, just there for the taking. Like things should be, always.

Daniel squeezes his thigh and finally cups him through his jeans, deliberate and unquestioning. In response, Johnny speeds up, taking them up through the Santa Monica mountains: still not quite pointing home but closer and closer.

He's pretty sure they're both thinking about nothing else when he pulls up the short drive in front of the house. Johnny's back is hot and slick, his shirt a little damp from the heat of Daniel's body. When the other man peels himself away and clambers off the bike, the slight breeze coming across the yard is a welcome relief.

Johnny pulls his key from the ignition and flips it around his finger on the ring. He is conscious of Daniel looking him over, and so he holds still for the inspection, eyes on the bike's gauges.

He's mostly hard, has been for the last ten miles: an obvious prominent line along his thigh distorting the stiff new denim of his jeans. He wonders if Daniel will touch him again, or talk him through it. What his plan is, if he has one.

“You know,” says Daniel, and he leans forward, draping a long, slender arm along the handlebars so he can duck his head and capture Johnny's eyes. He's smiling, almost impish. “Doesn't look like Susan's home. We got the house to ourselves. What do you think we should do with it?”

“Whatever you want,” says Johnny automatically.

Daniel's smile deepens. He leans harder, and it's almost like he's testing either the bike's or Johnny's balance or both for some reason. Weird.

“And if I want everything?” he asks, low.

In response, Johnny swings his leg over and gets off the motorcycle. His cock aches, but it's mostly a good ache. Anticipatory.

“Whatever you want,” he says again, and the words barely matter; Johnny could say anything right now and it would still just mean *please.*

Daniel puts his chin up and backs up a step towards the house. Johnny follows at a safe distance. If he gets too close to Daniel before they get inside, things will get indecent real quick, and Johnny didn't like the look of that Kislak crone the other day. Probably best not to be too obvious.

Daniel watches him until they get to the door, and then he makes quick, distracted work of unlocking it. He turns the knob and says over his shoulder, “You ever take a bath with another person?”

“Who takes *baths*?” says Johnny. Baths have always struck him as weirdly lazy, or self-punishing, or somehow both. Who the hell wants to lie curled up in a still pool of their own body water, thinking and staring at scaled tile?

“Oh Johnny,” breathes Daniel, pushing the door open and smiling back at him. “You just wait. I'm going to get you all loose and boneless in a bubble bath and then take my sweet time opening you up. Okay? Sound good?”

And it's disorienting, because on one hand Daniel is talking about fucking him, he's pretty sure, but he is also doing it in the relentlessly upbeat tone of a tour guide who caters to busloads of sunburnt tourists from middle America. It shouldn't be even remotely hot, and yet Johnny is five seconds from dropping to his knees for him.

(It's probably fine. He's in too deep to have a crisis after all this time about Daniel being a twerp. Johnny can be cool enough for the both of them. He always was, really; in high school gym class, Daniel *walked* the mile. And he never even looked ashamed about it, not once.)

“Okay,” he says, dry-mouthed and focusing on Daniel's fingers. “Sure.”

“Okay, sure,” Daniel echoes, rolling his eyes. He shakes his head. “Just wait, I'm going to blow your mind,” and he's still preening heavily to himself when he shoves forward into the house and promptly trips over the massive leather duffel sitting on the floor behind the sofa. He lands face-first on the floor.

Johnny stands on the threshold, still stupidly hard, and looks to Chozen, who has come out of the kitchen at the sound of Daniel's sharp squawk of alarm.

“Great news!” says Chozen, spreading his arms. “I am staying here now.”

“Oh,” says Johnny. He thinks about this. “Cool.”

“What do you mean, you're staying here,” says Daniel, leaning heavily against the counter. His strained tone is somewhat muffled by the bag of frozen French-cut green beans he has pressed over his nose. “You said you *weren't* staying here. You said that – didn't he say that?” he asks Johnny suddenly.

“Uh—”

“I have changed my mind,” says Chozen stoutly.

Daniel glares around his makeshift compress. “You've – changed your mind, right. That's great, that's just great. Not like this is my house or anything, no reason it shouldn't become a hotel for every struggling asshole I know—”

“I can leave,” says Johnny quickly.

“*Not you*,” snaps Daniel, and that's what Johnny figured he meant, but it still feels nice to hear. He straightens a little in his chair and goes back to snacking from the bowl of nuts on the table. Would've been better if the man didn't sound so annoyed when he said it, he thinks. But he's not being picky.

“Hotel?” sneers Chozen. “Please. This barely a flophouse.”

“And yet! You have decided you are staying here – *decided*, mind you!” And Daniel is doing an incredible amount of hand waving, it's kind of a lot to take in: the tour guide not handling an itinerary change well. “Note the word choice there. You didn't ask, you just hauled all your stuff over and, and—”

“If you want me to leave," he says coolly; smugly, "you know what to do.”

“I'm not fighting you,” says Daniel flatly, because he is nothing if not incapable of reading a room; Johnny is almost as disappointed as Chozen.

Daniel takes the French-cut green beans away from his face and tosses the bag in the sink before rolling his head back along his neck. He sighs at the ceiling. “Why is your condo suddenly uninhabitable, exactly?”

“Your nose, it's big and red like Gino from *Meatballs of Fury*,” says Chozen, delighted.

Johnny looks sharply over at Daniel to confirm (total Gino nose; he still absolutely would though) before asking Chozen, “You've seen *Meatballs of Fury*?”

“What,” says Daniel.

“Of course,” says Chozen, brightening. “A classic! Spaghetti Kung Fu should've been a bigger genre. I know Italian sound editor, he is nephew of man who did editing on *Meatballs*. Genius. Very racist, however.”

“I've only ever seen a dub,” says Johnny, regretful. “And the timing was a little off.”

“No, no, you must see the original,” cries Chozen.

“What the hell is happening,” says Daniel loudly. They both look over to him; Johnny really hopes the redness is from the ice. He supposes if he closes his eyes? Or really, what's he worried about, Daniel will ideally be behind him. “Chozen. What is wrong with your place?”

He shrugs and leans his shoulder along the wall, crossing his arms over his impressive chest. “My agent can find me there.”

“Oh. So you're hiding from her.”

“I'm avoiding her,” he corrects. “And since you insist on being a nobody, she will never find me here.”

Daniel narrows his eyes and nods. “Uh huh. And what'd she do this time, dishonor you by leaving the lunch soba out of a contract?”

Chozen points at him, suddenly serious. “Do not joke about my honor.”

“Who's joking?” demands Daniel, throwing his hands out. “You threw a fit about something like that like *two years ago*!”

Chozen makes a sharp, dismissive sound and slaps a hand at Daniel before turning and crossing back into the living room. Incensed, Daniel shoves away from the sink and rounds the counter to dog his heels.

“Hey, Chozen, I'm serious, man.”

“I know you're serious,” says Chozen with what Johnny is loyally not going to call a giggle. He bends to take the straps of his large, expensive bag and straightens with the load; his bicep is smooth and curved like an apple, designed for a mouth.

“There's no room, don't you get that?” persists Daniel, turning in place. “Where are you going – hey, whoa, you're not staying in my room! Me and Johnny are in there and I was an only child, okay, I do *not* share!”

Johnny digs into the bowl of nuts and shoves a fistful into his mouth, chewing furiously so as to not think about anything at all.

“Relax, Daniel-san,” say Chozen, suddenly all lightness and cool. “I will share with beautiful Susan.”

“Oh yeah? Have you checked with her about this?”

“I am an excellent bedmate,” he says instead of responding. “Very proficient at cuddling. I will hold her when she cries.”

Daniel's mouth opens but he stalls out, helpless and defeated. He watches agape as Chozen walks down the hallway, and Johnny watches him.

He should probably take Daniel's side in all this, he knows. He seems pretty upset about it, though Johnny doesn't really understand why. Johnny had been an only child too, and an only adult after that. He's never lived with anyone else before, and he thinks he kind of likes having people around. The line between relaxation and isolation got weird sometimes. Before.

He clears his throat. “So, are we still going to, uh,” take a bath together so you can finger me open, “you know."

Daniel turns away from the hallway and blinks at him.

"Fuck?" adds Johnny, helpfully.

He drags a hand up the back of his head and shakes his head, exasperated. “I – I don't know. I mean, the mood is kinda ruined, isn't it?”

Johnny abruptly changes his mind about having people around.

Chapter 44: ...

“You were in *Hot Wire Justice*?” asks Johnny blankly. “Where? And that was like ten years ago, what were you, sixteen?”

He is settled in front of Daniel's armchair, head back against the cushion between the man's knees. He doesn't know which of them he is trying to placate, but regardless he thinks it's working. He feels pretty content, anyway.

“It was *six* years ago, and I was Biker Number Two,” says Chozen. He flips the VHS in his hand around and peers at the back. He makes a dismissive sound. “This is an inferior copy. Overseas release, I am on back – you can't see my face, but it is me doing the Wall of Death with the flamethrower. Brock Kaneda claims it is him, but he is a dick. I'd recognize my posture anywhere.”

“I suppose that's what happens when you spend so much time checking yourself out in the mirror,” muses Daniel. He turns a page in his book, and somehow is very loud about it.

Chozen ignores him. He hefts another tape and with a flourish shows it to Johnny, who jerks forward in surprise – or tries to; Daniel's calves lock down over his chest like a roller coaster safety harness.

“*Final Hand*?” says Johnny, tense with disbelief. “No fucking way.”

“Fucking way,” says Chozen with satisfaction.

“Oh, lord, not *Final Hand*, can we not talk about that one?” begs Daniel. “He was insufferable last year.”

“Calls started pouring in,” says Chozen. “Everybody want to work with me after they see the fight on the Statue of Liberty.”

Johnny heard about the fight on the Statue of Liberty, but, “I haven't actually seen it yet. Meant to get around to it, but things got kind of,” he pauses, reaching and failing to find an adequate word, “busy.”

“We will watch it then,” decides Chozen, and he turns to the VCR. "Lucky Penny, you have good taste."

“No! No, please,” says Daniel, as Johnny turns *Lucky Penny* over in his head and finds he likes the shine of it. “I've seen it three times already, you can't do this to me in my own home. I forbid it, man. There are

lines—”

Johnny twists around and blinks up at him. He cuts himself off and gazes down in disconcerted dismay. Johnny slowly lowers his chin to the cushion, and Daniel's eyes widen and then narrow, half-offended.

“Seriously?” he says.

Johnny wants to see the fight on the Statue of Liberty; he can make it up to him later, he figures. And anyway, won't this sort of be good for Daniel? He seems to enjoy treating Johnny. Really, this is a win-win all around.

Johnny keeps staring.

“It just doesn't make any sense,” says Daniel, agitated. “Why does he go back to the casino? The woman and kid are safe, there's no reason to go back. Just disappear to the desert or something, man! Catch a Greyhound to anywhere.”

“Catch a Greyhound,” repeats Chozen, heavy and insulting.

“It makes no sense,” he insists.

Johnny turns his cheek into the side of Daniel's knee and tries to tune them out. He already knew that Daniel has no respect for cinema, but he's a little disappointed in Chozen. He expected better from him.

“It makes sense if one is not a coward.”

“That's not bravery, it's stupidity. Stupidity and bad writing, a double crime.”

It's not bad writing, thinks Johnny. Daniel doesn't get it. If you run, they'll always be right behind you. Your whole life: their eyes on you, their breath on the back of your neck. Who wouldn't choose to go back to the casino? Besides Daniel, that is. Daniel would find a way to magic himself out of the situation somehow, eyes finding paths no one else could see to follow him down.

“If Roy doesn't go back to the casino, I don't get my fight scene. You are just jealous of my fight on the Statue of Liberty.”

“It's not even the real Statue of Liberty. Have you been to the real one,

Chozen? *I* have. A bunch of times, and let me tell you, it's a lot more impressive than – oh, hey. Didn't expect you home."

The front door shuts and Susan says, "Letting yourself be bullied again? At some point maybe you should just admit you like it."

"Do I look like I'm enjoying myself?" asks Daniel.

Brow pinching, Johnny drops his shoulder, pressing closer. He curls his hand around his ankle, and Daniel responds by nudging him with his knee.

"Yeah, I can tell you're really suffering," says Susan. There are various rustling sounds: she is hanging up her purse on the wall; she is taking off her sandals and dropping them by the door: one, two. "What are you guys watching?"

"Don't you recognize it?" says Daniel. "Weren't you there for screenings two and three?"

"Join us," commands Chozen. In his peripheral vision, Johnny can see him beckoning.

She makes a light dissenting sound. "I think I'm going to take a nice, long bubble bath, actually. Maybe do a face mask? The possibilities for the night are endless."

"Well, glad *someone's* getting to enjoy my bathtub. So what, you're not going out later?" asks Daniel.

Johnny narrows his eyes. He wishes they'd all shut up. He can barely make out the words of Roy's voiceover. It's the emotional climax of the movie, and *no one is respecting it.*

"No, don't think so," she replies casually. She enters Johnny's vision from the side and heads down the hall. "Figure I'll take it easy, get a good night of sleep."

"Uh huh," says Daniel after her, equally casual. "Well, I hope the news that you'll be sharing with Chozen doesn't ruin those plans." He sounds like he really hopes the news she'll be sharing with Chozen ruins her plans.

"That's fine – I can hold him if he cries," she calls back.

Chozen says quickly, "She is joking."

“Uh huh,” says Daniel again, and then his legs spring into alarmed action, extending out and trying to snag Johnny back as he pulls away in irritation.

Johnny shakes him off and leans forward on his hands and knees to stab the rewind button on the VCR. On the television, Roy and his torn, bloodstained tuxedo shirt freeze and warp; Johnny looks at him, intent and unblinking. The VCR clicks and squeals and Roy starts shrinking backwards in the shot: running away from the fight, just like Daniel wanted.

“Seriously?” says Daniel. “You didn't miss anything, man. Roy says some terrible lines about the house always winning and how it's *so* tough, being rugged and manly but, yknow, somebody's gotta do it! And then he,” and Johnny sighs and hangs his head, and behind him Daniel finally stops talking.

“...Sorry,” says Daniel, once the tape is playing again and Johnny has returned to the chair. He sounds a little awkward.

Johnny puts his head back on his thigh to show him there's no hard feelings, and they rewatch the scene in relative quiet.

Daniel is in a tetchy mood for the rest of the evening for some reason, and he's really weird about it; he keeps choosing to do things that seem to only make it worse? Almost like he wants to be angry, like Susan accuses him of sometimes.

The topic of dinner comes up and Chozen volunteers to get them all delivery and of course, Daniel objects to this, though lord knows if he had to make dinner for everyone, he'd probably complain the whole time.

The man gets halfway through announcing he plans to do just that when Johnny gets a hand around his wrist and tows him from the room.

The bathroom's free but humid; it still smells faintly of coconut from Susan's bath. Johnny pulls a protesting Daniel inside and pushes him against the door to shut it behind them.

“Look – I'm sorry, but they're both out there,” says Daniel, thumping his dark head back against the door and sighing like a martyr, “and

I'm just not in the mood—"

"Tell me to get you in the mood," says Johnny.

Daniel pauses, lashes dipping in a slow blink. He turns his face towards him a little, eyes doubtful but sharpening with attention even as he says, "I don't think it works that way."

Johnny ducks his head to drag his nose through his hair. "How do you know if we don't try?"

And he waits there, not moving, lips against the curling shell of his ear. The rest of the house and its occupants might be close at hand, but Johnny's closer. He can make the difference, he knows he can.

After a long, considering moment, Daniel says, "Okay. Go on, then."

"What?" he asks, drawing back. He wants to hear the words.

Daniel's mouth indents at one corner. He tips his chin and says, "Get me in the mood, Johnny."

Johnny steps back and hauls his shirt over his head, arm muscles protesting a little at the movement because he is still recovering from training the day before. His hands go to his fly next and then his jeans and boxers are nothing but a memory, and he's stepping forward to make a better one.

He hitches Daniel firmly up against the door and kisses him. Daniel's hand skates up his back and buries in his hair, fingers digging in.

"Mm, okay," says Daniel, lifting his chin to let Johnny at his neck. "I'm convinced."

But Johnny's not done making his case. He braces Daniel against him and steps back towards the shower; Daniel's knees tighten over his ribs.

Johnny reaches blindly to knock the shower on and steps them into the tub, pinning Daniel against the tile and taking the brunt of the cold spray against his back until he deems it warm enough to expose the other man.

He wants him wet; he wants to peel the clothes off him, wants to work for every inch of skin bared.

...But the shitty shower is taking too long to warm up; Johnny starts to

shiver, gooseflesh appearing up and down his arms. He tries kissing Daniel harder, focusing on the heat of his mouth, the strong clasp of his hands working Johnny's ass.

“You know, if you'd let it warm up first before dragging us in here,” says Daniel, gently chiding. He pats the side of Johnny's face once, twice, before gripping his shoulder and pressing down. “On your knees, c'mon, get out of the spray.”

He sinks down gratefully, and Daniel wipes Johnny's soaked hair back, thumb dragging a tender line across his forehead. His shirt darkens and clings with the full brunt of the shower, but he doesn't seem to mind. Maybe it's finally warming up.

“Go on, take it out,” says Daniel, watching him with dark eyes unblinking behind dripping bangs. “I trust you know what to do from there.”

And of course Johnny does, he's not stupid.

He undoes the front of Daniel's jeans shorts. He has to jerk and pull hard to work them down over his hips, the curse of wet denim, and Daniel stumbles forward a little before slapping two hands on the tile beneath the shower head and leaning into it.

His torso shelters Johnny from the spray, his cock feeds him – for the moment, Johnny has all the basics of life, and he can rest.

Chapter 45: Journey to the Center of Something

Everyone has certain patterns when it comes to relationships, and Daniel's has always been – if one is lending credence to the bitter complaints of exes, and he's a little skeptical that one *should*, given said exes are hardly unbiased sources – a certain propensity on his part towards what one might call – and again, the connotation here is so negative, it points towards a clear prejudice, perhaps even outright slander – smothering?

You're not my dad! Nicole might've said, at one point or a dozen. Like you're only allowed to care about someone and have opinions if you begat them. Seriously, follow the logic of that backwards: who likes hearing their parent's opinion about their life anyway? Surely the opinion of a peer, a loving one at that, is something valuable and useful?

Why can't you just give me some space? Jack said, a couple times: usually when he was high and trying to hide it. And sure, space helped matters there plenty. Give a person enough space and they'll float right out of your life, taking all their problems with them.

See, Daniel learns from his mistakes. He has always been good at reading people; accepting what he reads is the real battle. But he has grown. He is careful. He figures out what a person needs and he tries his best to give it, even if he doesn't always understand or even agree.

Anyway, so far this isn't a problem with Johnny, mostly because Johnny seems to like it when Daniel is a little overbearing.

Case in point: when Daniel comes back to his bedroom after making coffee and climbs on top of the other man beneath the sheet, Johnny only responds by grabbing his hips. And when Daniel ducks his head and presses coaxing kisses to his lips, Johnny kisses back before he has even opened his eyes.

And then he does open his eyes, and they're clear and smiling up at Daniel like he's a miracle. He looks like he could sleep several more hours, happy to be a nice naked beauty taking up Daniel's bed – but he also looks like he could do whatever Daniel wants, and what Daniel wants is his mouth.

So Daniel gets his mouth.

He sighs and arches his back, hitching forward to lazily fuck Johnny's sleep-lined face. He looks out the window with eyes slitted in pleasure at the sunny morning. He contemplates the puffs of air pressing out of Johnny's nose as he fills him. He strokes Johnny's taut cheek idly with his thumb.

Sundays are the best.

Afterwards, Daniel lies on top of Johnny for a while, kissing him long and slow and jerking him off, and then he makes him a nice frittata for breakfast.

At some point Susan comes in and out of the kitchen, uncharacteristically quiet, but if she's got a problem Daniel's sure she'll tell him about it later. He is feeling quite benevolent, like he could solve world hunger or single-handedly accomplish global nuclear disarmament.

Halfway through doing the breakfast dishes, there's a knock on the front door. Daniel leaves Johnny to it and dries his hands on a kitchen towel, walking over to answer it. He's half expecting Susan has forgotten her key again.

He opens the door wide and stops, smile fading as he looks between the two bright polo shirts standing on his front step. They blink back at him in surprise.

He shuts the door in their faces.

“No vacancy!” he shouts through the wood.

“Was – was that *Daniel LaRusso*?” asks Bobby on the other side.

“And still a little freak by the sound of it,” says Tommy. Daniel scowls at the door. “This really the place? What the hell would John be doing here?”

“Take it easy.” Another clean, percussive knock follows, and a voice pitched to be heard heedless of the listener's own wishes: “Uh – Daniel? Hello? I don't know if you remember us, but my name is Robert Brown – Bobby. It's Bobby and Tommy.” He pauses politely. “You know, from school?”

Daniel rolls his eyes and walks away. He passes Johnny, who has come out of the kitchen looking confused. He is still drying a plate with a dish towel.

“You got visitors,” he says shortly.

Johnny frowns, like he is surprised to remember he didn't actually fall out of the sky into Daniel's lap, that his past is still out there: wearing chinos and trying to schedule a little game of squash for Sunday, probably.

“I know it's been a long time, and this might seem a little strange,” Bobby is continuing outside, the yuppie, “us coming by out of the blue like this, but we're actually looking for—”

“Oh, you know who we're looking for,” Tommy interjects with an impatient shout. “And if you don't open up and show us some proof of life, we're about to make yours very unpleasant. We have resources at our disposal that will flatten you quicker than this clapboard shack of yours probably got put up.”

Daniel raises his eyebrows and gives Johnny an impressed look. “Jeez, hear that? They got *resources*.”

Johnny has gone a little pink, but his expression is otherwise still and composed. “Sorry,” he says. “I'll take care of it.”

He hands the dish towel and plate over, oddly ceremonious, and wipes his hands down the front of his jeans before stepping forward. Daniel shakes his head and returns to the kitchen to finish cleaning up, resolutely not thinking about the implications of the two guys standing outside his house. Not his problem. What's his problem? He has one or a dozen, probably.

He stands at the sink, listening to the door open in the other room, Johnny's quiet *uh, hey guys*.

Daniel's problems, right. Maybe his other, mysteriously absent, house guest will do.

Daniel goes back through the living room, giving the now-closed front door the hairy eyeball as he passes through to the hallway. Maybe Johnny just didn't want those guys tramping around Daniel's house, or maybe Bobby and Tommy are trying to kidnap him? He trusts Johnny to fight them off, if that's the case. Man was always the best at karate.

There is a stubbornly unmoving lump still under the covers of the bed in the guest room.

He props his shoulder in the doorway and casts a critical eye around the room, which he hasn't gotten much of a look at lately because he respects people's privacy. He is quickly satisfied that Susan hasn't destroyed it or decided to put up new curtains or anything like that. Though Daniel has been meaning to replace all the curtains in the house; some of the linen is a little yellowed with age and he thinks he could go for something lighter, cleaner, younger? He's not a senior citizen, after all, he just lives next to a bunch of them.

“So!” he says casually, noticing the lump twitches at the sound of his voice. “I can't help but notice that it's almost noon and you haven't gotten up yet.”

A pitiful, weak cough emits from the rumpled bed, followed by a hand in the air, moving vaguely as if to give the impression of terrible fatigue – good thing this guy isn't a real actor. Stick to stunts, Chozen.

“I am unwell,” says the lump.

Daniel considers letting it be, but he's never been able to help himself when it comes to needling Chozen. It's a sickness, really. A shrink might have some insights.

“Oh?” he says.

“I do not think I can leave this bed,” Chozen continues heavily.

Daniel folds his arms. “Damn, what a shame. To be struck down in the prime of your youth – or, you know, your late twenties. And you looked so energetic and healthy just last night, challenging Johnny to that arm wrestling contest.”

Chozen pauses, clearly performing some quick calculations before landing on a safe: “Yes. It must have come upon me in the middle of the night.”

“Yukie will be so disappointed,” says Daniel, bland.

“Please pass along my apologies,” he says, cordial.

“I'll be sure to do that,” he says, kicking off the door frame. “Of course, she'll probably insist on coming over here to look after you. You know how she gets. She'll bring over piles of blankets and the

fixings for some soup. Probably make you drink a gallon of tea."

Chozen's head emerges from the bed and he looks at Daniel like he wishes he had a spear to run through him.

"In fact," he continues brightly, as if he'd just had the idea, "I better ring her now and let her know – wouldn't want her driving too late in the day, what with traffic and all, and you know how her eyesight's been changing. Probably best if she comes over earlier rather than later. She'll need the time to make the soup. Might take hours."

"You wouldn't," says Chozen, and he doesn't sound sick at all anymore, would you look at that. Crazy.

"Try me," he says.

Chozen throws off the covers and sits up. He is fully dressed. He says something rude about Daniel's mother in Japanese.

"Watch it," he replies in kind. "She's supposed to be there today too."

The silence on his front step when he yanks the door open again is artificial and strained, almost like the people who had been speaking didn't want Daniel to overhear what they had to say. Well, tough: they shouldn't be on his front step, if that's the case.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says pleasantly, "but we actually got a barbecue we gotta be at soon, so." He takes a page out of Johnny's book and stares at the three men, waiting.

Bobby looks quickly from Daniel to Johnny and back again. He tips his chin and tries, "Daniel – nice to see you again. Long time."

Tommy doesn't bother trying not to sneer at him. His hands are balled into fists in his pockets, distorting the line of his slacks.

"Yeah, uh huh," says Daniel, indifferent. "You ready?" he asks Johnny, who rubs the back of his neck and shrugs. He can tell Johnny is tense, and he doesn't like it. He wants these people to leave.

"A barbecue, that sounds great," says Tommy, too loud. Maybe the man has hearing issues, thinks Daniel. Didn't Johnny say he and his wife argue all the time? Maybe it's from all the shouting. Or maybe

the shouting happens *because* he has hearing issues. That is so sad. Daniel hopes the wife takes everything in the divorce.

“Should be nice,” says Daniel. “Looks like we're going to have great weather for it, so.” He doesn't make a *shoo* motion, but it's a near thing.

“You mind if we tag along?” asks Tommy, and Bobby says *Tom*, but doesn't actually follow this up with anything useful, so that's basically unchanged from school. Tommy smiles wide and false. “It's only, we haven't seen John here in ages, and hey, we'd love to catch up with you too. You and uh,” and he falters and stops, eyes going over Daniel's shoulder, to where Daniel can feel Chozen slouching sulkily against the door frame.

“Chozen,” supplies Daniel, and he frowns at Tommy. “Whoa, don't you remember Chozen? C'mon, man, he graduated our year.”

“We had class together,” confirms Chozen, and Daniel maintains an easy smile. He loves his dear friend Chozen!

Tommy eyes dart to Johnny, but Johnny is doing his expressionless thing again and is no help.

“Oh, yeah,” he says after a pause. “Sure. Of course – Chozen, hey, man. How's it going.”

“Terribly,” says Chozen.

Daniel claps briskly. “Right, so we're off to that barbecue—”

“Sounds like a plan,” says Bobby, and he's no longer looking at Daniel with his polite mask. He is unamused, and not a little suspicious. “John, wanna ride with us? We'll follow you,” he says to Daniel.

Daniel stops and looks at Johnny. So does everyone else.

“Yeah, sure,” says Johnny after a moment, and he gives them a smile so perfect and flat, he could be an advertisement in a magazine.

Chapter 46: A Terrible Drive

The inside of Tom's Audi is quiet, the world muted and darkened to greyscale the moment the doors close; Tom opted for tinted windows, and they turn the sunny afternoon flat and untouchable like a still-developing Polaroid.

“This is all kinda dramatic, don't you think?” asks Johnny from the passenger seat.

He'd moved swiftly to snag shotgun, figuring this would be easier if he didn't have to withstand Robert twisting to look back at him from the front like some kind of disappointed father figure. There is a lot of power dynamics involved in seating arrangements; Johnny knows this like the back of his hand. You always want to be the person with the choice of whether or not to look.

Tom glances sidelong at him, brow skeptical. “*Dramatic*? You want dramatic, how about us showing up at your place only to find weeks of mail piled up outside—”

“It hasn't been weeks,” he says evenly.

“—and then we track down the manager, she says no one's seen you in ages—”

He grits his teeth. “Yeah, Margaret's always been a nosy bitch, I still don't see why this suddenly has captured your attention, or why you're acting like I've joined a cult, become a Scientologist or something.”

“John, did you lose your job?” asks Robert quietly.

He waits a beat, looking forward out the windshield to Daniel's yellow car switching lanes. The man has the top down, and between Chozen's turned head and the sharp cutting motion of Daniel's hand as he briefly lifts it from the wheel, Johnny figures they're arguing about something.

“You know I hated that job,” he says at last.

A long, careful breath came from the backseat. “Okay, okay – look, what was the official reasoning for the termination? If it wasn't put down on paper as misconduct, you should be eligible for

unemployment. We can get the paperwork filed first thing tomorrow when the office opens. Now, as for the condo – what's your current mortgage payment? If you want to keep a hold of it, there might be a way to refinance—"

"Oh, *jesus christ*," groans Johnny, and he slumps down in the seat and puts his hands over his face.

This is so humiliating. He remembers a time when he was the one in charge, the one who knew what to do; the one who said *let's do that* and everyone followed along behind. But then the rules all changed and suddenly nothing that used to matter mattered and somehow everyone else magically understood it.

"Rob," says Tom dryly, "a man could be walking up to the gates of Hell and you'd double-check that he got his parking validated."

"I told you this morning we would have different priorities," he replies shortly, leaning forward as far as his seatbelt would allow to give Tom an irritated look from between the seats. "If you think I came along to allay the delicate concern of John fucking Kreese, then you—"

How'd you find me?

Why, were you supposed to be hiding?

Johnny drops his hands from his face and looks over at Tom. "What did Sensei say to you?"

His hands lift from the wheel in a slight shrug. "Not much? He called up to shoot the shit, ask me if my company would be interested in sponsoring your upcoming fight." His eyes slide over, heavy with judgment. "And then I was like, *what fight?* And at some point while he was filling me in on all *that* stuff you never told us, he happened to mention you also seemed to be living in Van Nuys with a weird crowd, and I was like, *Van Nuys*? So of course, moment he lets me off the phone, I try calling you. No answer, no machine. I call Rob and ask if he's heard from you lately, and," he waves a hand, "it all went from there."

Johnny says nothing. There is nothing to say, because nothing is happening.

The leather creaks as Robert sits back in his seat. Tom glances expectantly from the road to Johnny and back several times. Johnny keeps his eyes straight ahead and doesn't move.

“So – *what the fuck*, man?” shouts Tom finally.

“What the fuck what?” he asks.

“Are you for real? What is going on with you? Why are we are driving behind some twerp from high school on our way to a stranger's barbecue in – where the hell does this guy live? Tell me we're not going to Reseda. John, if I end up spending my Sunday afternoon in Reseda, I swear to god."

“You didn't have to come,” he says mildly. “I mean, you kind of just invited yourself along—”

“John,” says Robert.

“What?” he says with a slight laugh, twisting to look back at him. John's grin feels pasted on with a cheap glue stick, peeling up from the corners. “You guys are making asses of yourselves here, I don't know what you want me to tell you. Showing up like you're performing some kind of intervention, it's just. It's ridiculous, I don't —”

“I didn't know you kept in touch with Daniel LaRusso after school,” says Robert, neutral.

“Yeah, we're friends. Big deal. I needed a change of scenery after the shit show at Aalders & Bray, there's nothing more to it than that. I mean, you know Susan is staying there too, right?”

“Susan?” says Tom blankly. “What, like – *my* Susan? What the hell?”

“That makes it weirder,” agrees Robert.

“If you say so,” says John, shrugging like he doesn't notice or care. He sighs a little and slaps the visor down in a futile attempt to block the sun. He reaches and twists the A/C dial and glances back at Robert before relenting. “Okay, look – you're right. I'll start getting the unemployment forms together tomorrow. And the condo, I don't know. I haven't decided if I'm keeping it. Did you bring my mail?”

Robert nods with some relief and starts reaching for a briefcase in the opposite seat footwell. John waves him off with a lazy *later, later*, like the idea of a fat stack of envelopes to go through doesn't make him want to throw himself out of the car into traffic.

They drive in silence for a couple minutes, and he blinks slowly into

space, drifting.

“So what's he like, then?”

He stirs and looks around at Robert. “Who?”

Robert taps his knee and considers him, eyes sharp and clear in a way that would make another man nervous, if he had anything to be nervous about.

“Daniel,” he clarifies. “You been friends for a while? You've never mentioned him. What's he like?”

John shrugs a little and returns his eyes to the windshield. Ahead of them, Daniel is taking the exit for the 101. In John's mind, he is above Johnny in the morning light, pale sheet drawn into a luminous parachute over their bodies; his eyes brimming with warmth as he bends at the waist to hold his face like it's something impossibly precious. The kiss is already a dream fragmenting at the edges, leaving him with an ache in his chest.

“Same as he always was,” he says. “More or less.”

Chapter 47: A Strange Crowd

When Daniel talked about the barbecue, Johnny had imagined a group about the size of when they met up for drinks the other week. But as they pull up on the street where the Miyagis live, they find it lined with over a dozen cars. And when they climb out of the Audi, they can hear laughter and conversation through the tall fence bordering the property.

With Robert and Tom in tow, John can only feel relief that there will be so many people around – the dictates of social niceties might be the perfect buffer.

They walk up to the Ford just as Daniel is shutting the door; his eyes go first to Johnny, slightly questioning, but before he can respond they've already slid past him to the other two. And it's a good thing Johnny is pretty good at maintaining face, because otherwise he'd be wincing.

He forgot what it looked like, when Daniel doesn't like someone.

To his surprise, Chozen sticks close to them as soon as they get in the back yard. Johnny is distracted between looking around at the intricate, verdant garden and all the people in it and trying to pay attention to the weirdest meeting he has ever witnessed.

“So, Chozen,” says Tom, once they've found an open patch of grass in the crowd on which to set up camp. “What are you up to these days? Feels like forever since high school – did, did you come to the reunion last month? I don't think, I,” and he scratches the side of his neck and smiles politely.

“Have you seen Final Hand?” Chozen asks him.

“Interesting group,” Robert says to John.

He looks around with mild-mannered curiosity, and between his coral polo and the neat swoop of sandy hair combed back from his high widow's peak, he looks completely out of place. Which is saying something, because the people at the barbecue seem to be a wide range of ages and backgrounds.

But Bobby doesn't look like he feels out of place; like Daniel, he always seems to be fine wherever he finds himself.

“Yeah, I guess,” says John, wishing he had a drink. “First time I've been here, I don't really know most of these people.” Or like, any of them.

Where did Daniel go? He looks around for him, but only sees a wash of unfamiliar faces – well, wait. Isn't that Daniel's cousin? Twerp-adjacent. What was his name again? There are so many people here. What do the Miyagis do, run a local bingo hall? Is Mr. Miyagi some kind of Okinawan godfather? Is he inside the house right now saying to someone, you come into my house, on the day my semi-adopted son-slash-friend is attending a barbecue....

“I can't believe no one at the reunion was talking about this,” Tom says. “I mean, Susan certainly didn't say anything. One of our own being in the movies? That's – *wow*.”

“I am a very modest person,” admits Chozen.

“Well, good for you, man.”

“So, you coming to Ali Mills' wedding?” asks Robert, like this a completely normal question to ask a normal person.

“Oh? Yeah, I,” was totally not invited, “I don't think so? I mean, we haven't seen each other in forever. I think it'd be kind of weird, honestly.”

“I always thought it was a shame, that you two didn't work out.”

Jesus. “I don't know. That's all ancient history, man. High school was – a long time ago.”

“Is it. You know,” says Robert abruptly in an undertone, “we have a couple spare bedrooms. There's no reason—”

“Oh, c'mon,” says John, shaking his head. His stomach clenches but he laughs. “That's not—”

“What. Why not? John, you know Ashley would be fine with it, she'd *love* to have you.”

“Yeah, I know. I appreciate that but – it's just, it's not necessary,” he says and he keeps smiling, spreads his hands a little, like: see. Why

can't he see.

“Is there something wrong with my house? I mean, I know it's not as cozy as what Daniel's got.”

John meets his eyes and Robert looks back, unblinking and calm. He's going to push, but he's not going to *push*. Robert takes a lawyer's approach to conversations sometimes, gently herding a person down a certain line of thought until, hey would you look at that. Suddenly you're talking about it, and you're the one who brought it up.

“Oh, yes, Susan? We dated for a while after school,” Chozen is telling Tom a foot away. “I am a gentleman, so I don't kiss and tell, but the sex was – let's just say! Not the problem.”

“Really,” says Tom with a thinning smile. “That's – uh huh. Well, she's a great gal. I've always thought so. Did you know, we've known each other basically our whole lives? Yeah. Uh huh,” he says again.

“Look, I'm helping him fix the place up,” says John, because this has worked before.

“Right.” Robert nods, his hands easy in the pockets of his slacks. “When you're not training with Kreese, you mean.”

He blinks, and wariness tugging uncertainly at his sleeve of his thoughts. “Uh – I mean, sure. I guess. But the one doesn't really have anything to do with the other.”

“Doesn't it?” Robert cocks his head, abruptly inquisitive: finally, the real gambit.

John's mouth opens, and he has no clue what is about to come out of it.

“Hey, Johnny!”

He looks sharply over. Across the lawn, Daniel is standing on the walkway near the house and beckoning enthusiastically.

“He always so imperious?” asks Robert at his back.

“Excuse me,” he says without answering, and he steps quickly from the three men.

“What did you say your last name was again?” he hears him ask; the man switching targets without interruption. “I was on the committee

for the yearbook, and God, I feel so embarrassed, but I just don't think I remember a Chozen."

Johnny walks through the crowd, subtly stretching and shaking out his hands at his sides. He makes sure his smile is firmly in place as he steps up to where Daniel is standing with an older woman. Then Daniel hands him a cup of something minty and cold, and the smile loosens a little. Finally, something to do with his hands.

"Ma, this is Johnny," says Daniel. "Johnny, my mother Lucille."

"Daniel tells me you went to West Valley with him," she says and yes, this is the bare minimum of truth for sure. "Also that you do karate."

He blinks at the use of present tense, eyes darting to Daniel. "Yeah. Yeah, that's right. I'm training right now for a tournament, actually."

"Did you know, Daniel did a little karate once? He even told me – way after the fact, of course, I would've hit the roof – he almost tried entering a tournament back in high school?" She laughs, looking sidelong at her son. "I mean, can you imagine?"

"You don't have to make it sound like it's the *most* ridiculous thing you've ever heard," says Daniel, but his tone has no bite to it.

"I think he could've done alright," says Johnny, like it was nothing; as if he hadn't had a constant string of intense dreams about it for a short while ten years previous: standing across from Daniel on a mat in front of everyone and having a valid reason to bow his head. "I mean, he's got some moves. I'll give him that."

"Gee, thanks," says Daniel. His mouth is curling wryly, but his eyes are warm on Johnny's with the shared secret. His mother knows he is queer but is completely in the dark that he's a secret karate savant. He is so endlessly *weird.* Why would you want anyone to know the one but the not the other.

"So, Johnny, you a big reader?" asks Lucille.

"What," he says blankly, and then he follows the quick flick of her eyes down to the white shirt he's wearing: the cracking black ink of *Chevalier's Books* stretching across his chest. "Oh, uh – I had to borrow this – it, it was laundry day."

And he doesn't look at Daniel again, because he doesn't know how to without giving everything away, and it is probably one thing for a

mother to know something and another to have to look at it. Except:

“He's lying,” declares Daniel immediately, the little prick. “He keeps stealing all my shirts. Soon, I won't have a single one left.”

And Johnny's face grows hot, but when he dares glance at Lucille, somehow she looks only amused.

Chapter 48: An Inaugural Conversation

Over the next half hour, Johnny learns the following information from Lucille, who has Daniel's habit of claiming quick familiarity and is delighted to have found such a willing audience:

1) About ten years ago, Daniel returned from a summer in Okinawa and helped his friend Mr. Miyagi and Mr. Miyagi's new wife Yukie open a bonsai shop. He stuck around just until they were ready to open and then abruptly quit, because oh – you know how restless young men get, Lucille's sure.

2) Lucille was at loose ends in the new year and just about done with dealing with some family matters out east – *family!* Don't get to choose them, but boy, sometimes don't you wish you could? (“Uh,” says Johnny. “Yeah, I guess.”) Not that she wasn't happy to help Uncle Louie, of course. Family is very important. You do what you have to do. Anyway, she was missing Daniel something awful by the time she came back to the valley, and it all just fell into place quite nicely, you see, because Mr. Miyagi is a *genius* with the plants but – well. Not the best when it came to customer service. That man used to hide from tenants, Lucille remembers very well. Now Yukie, she has a great head for managing a plant business, apparently she did some of that back in Okinawa, but the shop was a lot to handle for one person. So it just worked out for everyone that Lucille was able to step in and lend a hand. And now the shop has expanded to a more all-purpose plant nursery that happens to specialize in bonsai for the discriminating green thumb, and did you know, Lucille has never been in one job for so long in her entire life? To be honest, she'd kind of started to think it wasn't possible? (“Yeah, tell me about it,” says Johnny fervently.)

3) Yukie is a darling – there she is, do you see? Next to the young Asian man who looks like he swallowed a lemon. Oh, you've met them, that's great. Mr. Miyagi is a very lovely man, of course, but he can be a *little* antisocial. It's so lovely she can pull him out of his shell sometimes. And you know Chozen as well? Oh, he's – a fine young man. Little bit of a black sheep, from what Lucille gathers. But a fine young man. Yukie tries very hard with him. Lovely woman. She understands the importance of family.

And that would've been fine and safe: mission Meet The Mother

accomplished. Except then Johnny has to do something which goes against every instinct he possesses, which is talk about himself. Lucille, it turns out, has actually been luring him into a false sense of security and now expects to have all of her ravenous curiosity about Daniel's new boyfriend sated, which results in the next fifteen minutes going something like:

1) Boyfriend – Daniel said? And he just – yeah, no, it's. That's right. Um. Johnny's – yes, yeah. They're – dating. It's great. Daniel's great. Real uh. ("Great?" supplies Lucille drly.)

2) Johnny has fought in tournaments before. He used to – it was a while ago, but he actually once fought Gary Pinetti in a title match. (“Afraid I don't know who that is,” says Lucille apologetically.) He was kind of a big deal in the 80s. (“Ooh!”) Yeah. And uh, right after that, Johnny almost signed with a new manager, was thinking about fighting in some tournaments overseas. But then the PKA folded and things got more uncertain, so he – he didn't do that.

3) Then he took a job. In advertising. (“Oh, so – not quite as exciting a line of work, I imagine,” says Lucille sympathetically, maybe in answer to his tone or expression, or maybe because she's just really smart and perceptive like that; she is Daniel's mom, after all.) Yeah, not really. (“But you're back at the karate, you must be so thrilled!”) Yeah. Yeah, he is. (“You know, Johnny, take it from an old woman —”) You're not old, Mrs. LaRusso. (“Oh, stop. Thank you. Anyway – look, jobs come and jobs go, you have to just shake off the bad ones like dust from the road, you gotta—”) Take the money and run? (She laughs and touches his elbow: a butterfly flutter that could lead to a tornado.)

And when Daniel detaches himself from where he'd been standing next to Mr. Miyagi – hard to say if he had been helping the man with the grilling or just talking his ear off – and steps up to them once more, he watches for only a short while before he starts to look faintly alarmed, because by then it's going like this:

1) Johnny can see where Daniel got the big plans for his own yard. This place is pretty cool – you all run a gardening shop, so that makes sense. (“Did you know, the last time I came around, he wouldn't even let me look at his back yard? I'm sure he completely missed planting season, the summer heat's going to kill any seedling he tries to put in

now.") Sure, it looks like a work in progress, but Johnny is helping him build a deck. ("Oh, are you? It'll be so nice to have somewhere to sit when I visit. Are you very handy?") Uh, willing to try? Johnny finished painting his house last week, if that counts. ("It *does* count," she says firmly. "Daniel has so many projects around the house that need finishing.") Yeah, his bathroom doesn't lock. And he needs another bookshelf for the living room. But hey, you know – he's a busy guy. ("Yeah, that's right," says Daniel finally, overcoming his outrage. "Thanks, Johnny.")

2) Lucille is actually very glad to see Daniel dating someone from high school – you might think that sounds funny, but a little bit of history goes a long way in her experience. Call it an Italian thing. Daniel really seems like he's been drifting these past few years. ("It's called being in one's twenties, Ma," Daniel says through his smiling teeth.) You know, buying that house is the first sign he's given that he's actually interested in settling down? ("Ma.") And Lucille would never badmouth previous *partners*, but let's just say she always thought he could do better. ("*Ma.*") It almost feels appropriate that he would reunite with someone from his youth? You know, back in high school he dated this lovely girl, and I swear after it didn't work out he was upset for ages, just wasn't the same bright, cheerful boy— ("Oh my god, Johnny, please do not listen to this.")

3) Oh, Ali. Yeah, Johnny knew Ali. Since middle school, actually. Great girl. She and Daniel made a really cute couple. ("Are you – are you serious?") ("Oh, didn't they *just*?") You know, Johnny was actually pretty jealous of them back then? ("*No!*") Oh yeah, big time. It was pretty embarrassing. He would see them in the hallways at school, and he wouldn't even know where to look or what to do. ("I cannot believe you right now, man.") They just seemed so perfect together. And Johnny didn't get why, well, you know.... Why Daniel couldn't look at *him* that way. ("The fucking nerve—") ("Johnny, have you been carrying a torch for him all this time?") Ha, yeah. Afraid so. Johnny had almost given up all hope, actually, before Daniel walked back into his life. ("Wow.") ("*Wow.*")

And then he smiles at Daniel as if completely besotted, because it turns out he feels comfortable being open about all his feelings if it means messing with the other man a little. It's actually pretty funny. Plus it has the secondary benefit of making Lucille really, really happy. She's practically beaming at him, which at the moment is ten

times more important that Daniel glowering.

The glower, he figures, he can fix or make up for later. And if not, well, then at least he'll know the line. He wants to know the line, he'll need it eventually.

Johnny is still smiling when he glances around the yard. His eyes snag on Robert and Tom, standing next to a Chozen and Yukie who seem to be arguing rapidly in Japanese. The two men are watching him: Robert, intent; Tom, more quizzical. His smile starts to fade.

Then the masked men start silently dropping over the fence at their backs, and the smile is gone completely because Johnny is shouting a warning.

Chapter 49: ...

Daniel is still gaping in disbelief when Johnny turns and says, “Mrs LaRusso—”

“Now, I *told* you,” she starts in a chiding tone – the same tone Daniel used the previous week explaining why the all-purpose flour they'd bought was actually not all-purpose, but in fact entirely wrong; something about protein content? Susan had walked out of the room and Johnny chose to focus very intently on the shape of Daniel's mouth rather than the sounds that were coming out of it.

“Lucille, right,” he says hastily. “You should go inside the house now.” And his hands hover uncertainly because it's probably bad form to manhandle someone's mom, but also, it's for a good cause? She's so small. “Um, quickly? Please.”

Daniel snaps out of his open-mouthed catatonia a second later, not hesitating to take his mother by the shoulders and steer her swiftly away. She goes, twisting to dart looks back at the yard. “Daniel, what on earth – who are those men? Should we call the police?”

“Yes, please, do that,” Johnny hears him say, and then he's not paying attention any more because babbling, panicked barbecue guests are pushing past him, making it difficult to do anything but stand like a rock until the confused stampede has moved on.

Through the bodies, he watches the intruders array themselves – he counts at least a dozen. All in black with masks over their heads. *Ninjas?* And he looks for Chozen, thinking: he's gotta be so into this too, but Chozen is still dealing with Yukie.

“Go, go,” Chozen is ordering her impatiently, flicking his hands, “Shoo, Aunt. Into the house, go. Tell him I will take care of this. He is not to interfere, this is *my* fight—” but she interjects with something which fractures his cool, and then he replies tersely in kind, and John's not judging, but it seems like a really bad time to get into a family argument? Also, what a buzzkill.

Tom takes a half step back and turns a little to take in the line fanning out around them. He gestures with his drink, ice tilting and clinking. “What the fuck,” he says, affronted. “It's a *Sunday*.”

“This a usual occurrence around here?” Robert asks John as he steps

up beside him. He doesn't take his eyes off the men, and Johnny is pleased to see he sliding into a ready stance; he wonders if the man is even aware of it.

“I guess we did get jumped by a bunch of guys a few days ago,” he says, eyeing the three men nearest them. They were completely unreadable in their get-ups, and he kind of liked that. Maybe he should ask them where they got the job. Do they post this kind of gig in the Classifieds?

“Seriously?” says Robert, darting an incredulous glance at him for some reason. “What kind of crowd does Daniel run in, exactly?”

It's a good question, but the only thing that leaps to mind is the one thing and – shit, thinks Johnny: is this some kind of gang of gay bashers?

Yukie finally turns and runs towards the house, calling for her husband. Johnny meets Chozen's gaze over his head and nods. They took those guys the other night no problem. Even if their only backup is two guys wearing oxfords, they should be fine without—

“Has anyone asked what they want?” says Daniel, stepping up to the scrimmage line. He looks at the wall of black and pitches his voice to be heard across the garden: “The police are being called, they should be here any minute. It's not too late for you all to turn around and, and – just go home, alright. Whatever this is, I promise you, it's not worth it. Unless you have an appreciation for nice Okinawan woodworking, there's really nothing in the house to steal.”

The men don't move or say anything. Chozen's hands go to his hips; his head tips back and he sighs at the sky. And Johnny is loyal, so he just suggests in an undertone:

“Maybe you should go inside with the others.”

Daniel looks sharply at him. “You think I'm going to cower in the house while these bozos trample all over Mr. Miyagi's garden?”

“But you don't like fighting.”

His expression twists. “This isn't recreational, Johnny.”

Tom glances over as he steps backwards to join them, completing their battle line. “Aw, Danielle still a coward?”

“How old are you, man?” snaps Daniel, and the thing is: beneath the irritation, he does sound a little scared.

Even knowing the man's skills, Johnny can't help but respond to the fear in his voice. He wishes he felt less embarrassed by it. But nobody's perfect, even Daniel, and him being scared only reveals that deep down – he's still kind of naive, turns out.

You only fear a fight if you don't realize you're already in one; if you lie to yourself, pretend the world is something other than what it is. Maybe that's okay for Daniel, though; maybe the lie is what is needed to make that quiet space Johnny now gets to return to at the end of every day. The lie about *safe* that is necessary to make a home. Everybody does it. Some are better at it than others; Johnny never learned the trick. He's always been left with the truth of the fight.

So when the fight comes to him, the only thing he feels is relief: finally, a chance to do something, to have some measure of control over what comes next.

And what comes next?

“Too old for *this*,” says Tommy, and he flips his grip on his drink and throws it unerring at the head of the nearest man.

Always, always, the hit.

Chapter 50: "play free bird"

In the space and breath between conscious thought and mindful intention, the edges of individuals meet and interact in innumerable ways invisible to the naked eye: instinctual, chemical, emotional, subatomic; or in other words:

Daniel goes high and Johnny low, and in the perfectly complementary strike on their opponent, the borders between them all disappear for an instant too short to be measured by human consciousness. Three bodies become one system, moving towards a predetermined endpoint.

The man in the middle spins through the air; Daniel starts to drop his leg; Johnny starts to rise.

If this system could be paused and expanded, if its constituent parts could speak to one another, the conversation might go something like this:

```
   constituent.daniel
so a couple years ago, researchers from the
university of colorado announced the discovery of
the largest living organism in the world just south
of the wasatch mountains in utah: a quaking aspen
comprised of almost 50,000 trees covering over 100
acres, sharing the same genetics, the same root
system. they named it pando.

   constituent.johnny
a person has to have a name, even if that person is
actually 50,000 trees. you can choose one for
yourself eventually, but first you must be given
one; it's how the world knows to say hello or walk
on by. that's the frightening part - to ever be a
person, someone has to first want you.

   constituent.gerry
starting to think this job didn't pay enough.
```

The system completes and collapses and they continue forward having already forgotten the moment of connection. It's the inevitable endpoint of every moment of their lives: alone again. But they keep reaching out. They keep finding each other.

A man rushes in towards Johnny, stepping sure across the grass. Johnny steps to the side, bringing his knee up to catch him in the middle. He shoves the off-balance body towards Daniel, who jumps and rolls over that bowed back, plucking up an arm along for the ride.

Daniel's hands release their payload; the man rises through the air; Johnny's leg lifts for a snapping kick.

A new system of potential forms.

```
   constituent.daniel
okay, don't let us get sidetracked here. pando
existed before he had a name - some scientists
believe the clonal colony might actually be
functionally immortal. it could be a million years
old! the name is a convenience we use for the sake
of discussion, that's not the point.

   constituent.johnny
there's a point?

   constituent.brad
don't know who pando is, but he can't be a million
years old when the earth is only 4000. it's in the
bible.

   constituent.daniel
oh, don't even, man.
```

Even before the man has landed in a crumpled pile on the ground, another jumps Johnny from behind: arms locking around his neck and tightening expertly.

Johnny writhes and strains back to fight the pressure, eyes slamming closed with the effort. Gone is any knowledge of Daniel; of the flashing movements of Chozen on the periphery; of Bobby and Tommy limbering up, loosening back into themselves.

In the dark, there is only pain and the unwelcome touch of the stranger. And he knows, he knows how to get out of this; Sensei taught them how to get out of this. Johnny draws his arm up—

The man abruptly releases him, stumbling to the side and revealing Daniel still in the afterthought of one of his blunt, iron-bar strikes. Johnny gathers himself enough to twist around and drive his fist into the man's jaw. It's clumsy, only half-powered, but he still falls back.

Daniel's arms lift to catch the man; Johnny throws a much more neat follow-up right cross; in the second before it lands, the man almost seems like he's waiting to take it, because people always do when Johnny hits them. He becomes something inevitable.

```
   constituent.daniel
besides the obvious biological freak show aspect of
the whole thing, what does it matter if pando is
considered one organism instead of a community of
50,000? you cut down a few dozen or even a few
hundred trees, and pando will still live. but we
prefer the idea of the individual - say the
environment gets destroyed and a forest is dying,
okay. not great. now what if the whole forest is
actually the same guy, this one guy who has been
alone with just himself for basically forever—

   constituent.johnny
that makes it sadder.

   constituent.daniel
yeah, but why?

   constituent.johnny
it just does.

   constituent.joe
it's definitely sadder.

   constituent.daniel
only if you're focusing on the wrong thing. it's not
like, like entanglement and internal communication
or whatever is the sole purview of clonal colonies,
okay? look at any proper forest, and there's like -
plants, they all communicate with each other, right,
```

and fungi? it's a whole complicated system of interdependence and then you add in the *animals*, and well—

constituent.johnny
why are you trying cheapen pando, man?

constituent.daniel
what? that's not—

constituent.joe
no, you totally are.

They don't move like independent people. Or rather, they move individually but automatically in cooperation towards a barely-understood but mutually-conceived goal. Words are not necessary; looks are barely necessary.

Johnny understands any move Daniel makes before he has made it, and it never occurs to either man to doubt the source or validity of this knowledge. There is no time, anyway; another assailant is approaching, and the smooth elongation of Daniel's arm comes precisely where and when Johnny expects it to.

It's a beautiful thing about bodies, when they become something real and not just seen: the impact of the next man's back against Johnny's chest; the fall and slide of his body before Johnny grabs his arms and flips him; the perfect shock in the man's eyes (hazel) when he is cleanly head-butted to the ground.

The man falls between them; Johnny reaches for Daniel; Daniel is already rising up on his toes. Here is them and for a moment, they are everything.

constituent.daniel
we seem to value the idea of existence more than that of connection, as if they are somehow separate from each other. we see it as somehow more *real* or immutable. but nothing exists by itself, not even pando-if-we're-calling-pando-an-individual.

constituent.johnny

why did you talk about pando in the first place then?

constituent.toby
feel like maybe... stepped into the middle of something here?

constituent.johnny
it's easy to talk about community when you're already in one, when it's somehow just there and always has been. of course it seems more interesting or important or, or whatever the fuck you're saying—

constituent.daniel
okay, okay, jeez—

constituent.johnny
maybe we talk about individuals because at the end of the day, that's what we all *are*. everything else can go away, disappear. everything and everyone, until it's just you. and that's forever. for however long you happen to live, anyway.

They fit together as perfectly as ever. Johnny is present and clear-eyed as he only ever gets when he's fighting, but it's better because Daniel is there too. Daniel's body goes *may I have this dance* and Johnny replies *only if you let me lead*, and of course Daniel lets him for the moment, because he's never cared much about that kind of thing, so long as he gets to dance at all.

The men keep coming – there are so many of them? And Johnny's bleeding from his nose, tastes the heavy metal proof of vulnerability when he licks his lips. He stumbles, but Daniel's there to catch him every time.

In the twist and flex of his body as he fights, Daniel shows Johnny a lifetime of tomorrows.

constituent.daniel
johnny, johnny – you're not pando, man.

constituent.howard

who's pando?

constituent.daniel
or if you are, it's because we all are.

constituent.howard
we are? me as well?

constituent.daniel
you just gotta let yourself read the signals coming through the roots.

Chapter 51: Not Nearly Quiet Enough on the Western Front

Daniel has always loved the Miyagis' garden.

When he moved out here, it was the first place besides the beach that felt like it lived up to all the hype about California. A crappy apartment in Reseda isn't all that different than a crappy apartment in Newark, after all; when everything in sight is covered in asphalt and cement, it doesn't really matter if the occasional tree clinging to life on the edge of a street happens to be a palm. But then he saw Mr. Miyagi's house, and he got a feeling, an inkling of how things should be. How maybe they *could* be, with just a little care and attention.

There had been a time when he was a teenager when stepping through the gate to Mr. Miyagi's garden was like entering a portal to a different, better world, one blooming over with color and possibilities and also, so many chores. But even those were okay, really. Mr. Miyagi's was where he learned that hard work actually did pay off, if you let it; if you found the right people to work alongside.

All he wanted when he bought his own house was to make a space like this one: a place full of beauty. He hasn't quite got around to doing that yet, but the idea of it is always in his head whenever he looks out the (now busted) window in his kitchen to the (now wrecked) back yard.

He's had this thought once or twice lately. Well, more of an image than a proper articulation of a plan, but: a yard lined with terracing plant life, flowers blooming along trellises spilling into bushes sitting behind plump beds of – some kind of ground cover, he hasn't really worked that part out yet, he needs to get his soil tested and read up on what will work in partial sun, and the benefits of the different types – but anyway, in the middle of all this, beneath the tree – he's going to have a tree, also; a big one – Johnny spread out waiting open and wet for him on a blanket.

“Maybe will grow back,” says Mr. Miyagi, stepping up beside Daniel.

“Hm?” Daniel looks away from the crushed beardtongue he has been staring fixedly through for a while now. “Oh, I – yeah, I hope so.” He glances over the man's shoulder towards the house. “The cops done questioning everyone?”

(They won the fight.)

“Hai. Police taking men away now.”

(Daniel wishes there was a better word to use, because he feels ridiculous saying that even in his own head. What, after all, did they *win*? The right to continue on with their day? A house full of traumatized barbecue guests? What a prize. Remind him not to enter this particular sweepstakes ever again, thanks. Who sold him this raffle ticket and can he get a refund?)

Daniel nods and chews the corner of his lip. He lifts a hand and rubs his eyes and sighs out from beneath it, “God, I'm really sorry about everything, Mr. Miyagi. What a mess – the barbecue and your garden....”

He waves a hand. “Not Daniel-san's fault.”

“It's not Chozen's fault either,” he says, because he knows that tone. “I mean, pretty sure. I don't know whose fault it is – don't suppose those guys said anything to the cops? Overcome by guilt, they decided to confess on the spot with a clearly-worded explanation of motivation? No?” Mr. Miyagi shakes his head. “Right. 'Course not.”

He nearly kicks the ground, but he figures the ground's had enough of a beating for one day.

“Enough sulking over flower bush – Miyagi secretly not like it too much, anyway. Now Yukie must plant something better in spot.”

They turn back to the house.

“Mr. Miyagi, I don't know how to tell you this,” says Daniel, “but that wasn't really a secret. Yukie told me, she was waiting to see how long it took you to say something.” She told Daniel this three years ago.

“Said nothing – bush gone, Miyagi still here. Who real winner?”

Johnny and the others must be out front, he gathers. He moves through the crowded house, journeying along a gauntlet of gawking and misplaced congratulations and/or sympathies, and he doesn't see any of his fellow glorious warriors.

“I didn't know you could fight like that,” says Cassie from the left. *Ha! Well.* (Do you regret turning me down for that date a while back? No, don't say that, don't say that—)

“That was really something, Daniel,” says Bill, while his wife Diane adds, “How long have you done karate?” *Oh, that? That was really nothing – it's just something I do for exercise sometimes, you know. It's ah, good for cardio.*

“Now if the boys could've seen that, maybe they wouldn't call you Gay Dan behind your back,” says Lou from the right and *they call me Gay Dan to my goddamn face, Lou.*

“My goodness, that looked so dangerous,” says Mrs. Packmore breathily, looking him over head to toe. “You must feel so overwhelmed, poor thing.” *I'm fine, thank you, Mrs. Packmore. Can I have my hand back? See, I didn't even break a nail.*

“Daniel.” His mother, oh god.

No, he can't face this right now. The kitchen, three o'clock, go go go!

He darts into the kitchen, but of course, she follows him. He doesn't know why he thought she wouldn't. He has such bad instincts sometimes. This is why he hates it when people find out about the fighting; people expect him to suddenly be this whole different person but he remains pretty stubbornly himself. And that guy is currently failing to hide from his mother in someone else's kitchen.

She spends a full minute turning him in place to look for injuries. He rolls his eyes and makes some complaining noises that spectacularly fail to shorten the check-up. It's a humbling moment. Thank god Chozen isn't seeing this – fuck, thank god *Johnny* isn't seeing it.

“You want to check the inside of my mouth too?” he asks her. “Still got all my teeth, but I think I've got an ulcer coming near the back of my throat. Here, take a look,” and he opens his mouth wide and says *ahh* obnoxiously and then Cassie is stepping into the kitchen and then Cassie is stepping back out of the kitchen, and great. Perfect. Daniel shuts his mouth and stares bleakly in space.

“Have you tried gargling with salt water?” asks Lucille crisply, stepping back; inspection complete. He turns away and she starts in at his back, “Daniel, do you have any idea what it was like to sit in this house, pressed up against the window with all those people, watching my only son kung fu across the backyard like some kind of trapeze

artist?”

Kung fu? Trapeze? What? She comes up with such nonsense sometimes.

He might as well grab some supplies for Johnny while he's in here. He bends and lifts a large bowl from the cupboard. He hits the tap for warm water and watches the water level rise and says very evenly to his mother:

“That was karate. You knew I did karate. You've known this for years and years. Ever since I came home from school that one day near the end of junior year and said, Ma, I'm going to the Y and I'm gonna take karate."

“Don't pretend like what you let me know and what I know now even live in the same city as one another.”

He sneaks a look; her arms are folded across her chest. Jeez.

He spreads his arms helplessly. “Look, I don't know what you want me to say here – I don't fight. I don't like to fight! It's not what I would consider a big part of my life? Hey, remember,” and here his self esteem is finally restored, because this is actually very cunning, “remember how I brought my new boyfriend here to meet you today? That was me sharing the *important things* with you. I don't think we should get side-tracked because some strange people decided to gatecrash the barbecue.”

“Strange people!” says Lucille. “*Gatecrash*. Don't give me that nonsense. You and your new boyfriend just brawled with fifteen men —”

“It wasn't *fifteen*—”

“—and you know the thing that is really disturbing me about all of it —”

“It was like, ten tops—”

“—is that you don't seem to be more disturbed about all of it yourself!”

Daniel shuts off the water. He stares down into the sink a moment, weighing whether it's better to say anything or if it'll just provoke more worry. Except his own is sitting so close to the surface, so finally

he swallows a little to clear his throat and says quietly:

“Ma, I'm filling this bowl so I can go maybe clean the blood off Johnny." He shakes his head a little. "You know, since he showed up at my door, there hasn't been a single day where I've gotten to see him without some kind of bruise or injury? He's just – he's hurt, all the time. There's always something, but the guy training him doesn't seem to – and anyway, I don't know who those guys were today, but I have this terrible feeling they're somehow after him.” He looks over to her. “So, like – rest easy, I guess? I'm plenty disturbed.”

“Oh, Daniel,” says Lucille. Then, gentle like breaking bad news: “Playing the savior again?”

And he really wishes people would stop accusing him of this; on top of everything else, even if that was what was happening, which it's not – he's not doing a very good job, is he.

“Where's Chozen?” he asks when he lets himself out front and finds only the three musketeers loitering around by the aloe.

“A woman came, said she was his agent,” says Tommy. “It was really weird, seeing a guy that tough get yelled at by someone so tiny. I mean, he took out at least three of those guys on his own.” And this is why Tommy is dumb; he thinks Chozen's ability to punch good is somehow remotely relevant to whether he can be bullied by a woman who routinely handles Hollywood industry personalities and contracts.

Distantly, Daniel is aware this is the best news he has heard all day; maybe the best news he could ever hope to hear in a lifetime. Normally he'd be laughing and cheering and maybe even performing a quick victory dance. However, it's hard to summon the appropriate level of joy because Johnny is climbing to his feet from where he'd been sitting on the ground, and his face is a terrible mess.

His hair and shoulders are damp, like maybe he tried splashing water on his face while Daniel was taking his turn talking to the police. Daniel hopes he did it in the bathroom at least, and didn't use the garden hose. Regardless, whichever option he went with was inadequate, because the lower half of his face is still streaked faintly with now-dry blood. Between this and the new black eye and the still-healing *old* black eye, he looks—

He is smiling a little. Smiling and blinking softly at Daniel.

Tommy says, “And you know, I figured out the little joke you guys were playing, saying he was from our school. Ha ha fuck you too. No way did that guy go to our school.”

“Oh man, what gave it away?” says Daniel, and he casts about the front of the house, locates one of the old milk crates Mr. Miyagi likes to use to hold tools. Still awkwardly holding the bowl of water in one hand, he kicks the crate to its side to empty it and then hooks two fingers through the plastic and brings it over to Johnny.

“Here, sit, will you,” he says, and Johnny sits. If he cares that his old school buddies are standing a few feet away watching them, he gives no indication of it. God, what if he's got some kind of head injury? Or like, shell shock.

Daniel bends forward and squints suspiciously into Johnny's eyes. A blond eyebrow lifts. Daniel gives up on this particular diagnostic test.

“So,” says Tommy loudly into the silence. “What the hell, LaRusso? You can fight?”

Daniel ignores him, because always and forever fuck this guy. He sets the bowl of water into the crook of his elbow like a baker and dips a washcloth into it. He mimes tipping his head back, and Johnny angles his face obediently. Daniel dabs at the broken skin beneath his nose, and he doesn't wince but only because Johnny isn't wincing, and also because Bobby Brown is still staring at him.

“Could you fight like that back in school?” continues Tommy, the very foundations of his universe shaken, apparently. “I mean, do you think you could take John?”

If one more person asks Daniel if he could beat Johnny, he thinks he might do something rash, like purchase ad space in all major North American newspapers. Maybe this is what he's been doing wrong this whole time. He simply hasn't made his position clear enough. Full-page statement of his views should do it, and what the hell, it's the midterms this year. Maybe he'll throw in some other opinions on select topics. Since he's got the space and all.

“He doesn't have to,” says Johnny quietly, meanwhile. “He's already got me.”

Daniel's hand goes still on his face. He meets Johnny's eyes.

There is a short silence.

Too short.

“*Well*,” says Tommy, and it feels like he's talking to Bobby; Daniel doesn't look away from Johnny in order to check. “I guess we'll call that confirmation. There you go.”

“Yeah,” says Bobby. “Guess it is.”

Chapter 52: The Way of Some Flesh

Johnny doesn't look away from him and his expression remains perfectly unchanged, so Daniel is the only one who is forced to watch the awareness and uncertainty seep in. It's the kind of look that calls to something in him, makes his resolve harden like he might need it to build a wall.

“I think I'm gonna call it a day,” he announces, and of the many differences between now and ten years ago, this one is perhaps the best: Bobby and Tommy can't do shit to stop him and Johnny doesn't want to.

It's probably not his best moment as a friend or a son, collecting Johnny and leaving the barbecue without another word to anyone. But on the other hand, think of the conversational material he is providing! No more small talk about OJ or, god forbid, reopening the never-quite-closed wound of the Miyagis' Little Trees & Great Plants Orchid Debate.

Also! When anyone asks Mr. Myagi if he knew *Daniel* knew karate, the man will get to play dumb and say something vague that completely elides his own skills in that department – he loves that kind of thing. Nothing funnier in the world. If it wasn't for his damaged garden, really, he might even thank Daniel for the opportunity.

Speaking of, Daniel really needs to check his schedule for the coming week and see when he can fit in a few hours to go over there and help set things right. How much sleep does a guy really need? He's in his twenties still, it's fine. Don't they say you need less sleep as you get older? Really, it's fine.

“Do you have any enemies?”

Daniel blinks and glances at his passenger. Johnny stares back expectantly.

“Uh, me and the garbage truck that services our street have sort of been feuding for a while,” he says. “But I'm optimistic we can work things out.” It's more of a one-sided grudge, anyway.

Johnny frowns like he's not amused, which isn't much of a surprise – his sense of humor has always been a little lacking. He's lucky he's so pretty.

“The IRS?” Daniel tries again, when the scrutiny doesn't let up. And then, in realization and sudden affront: “Hey, whoa – c'mon Johnny, you can't think those guys attacked the barbecue because of *me.*”

“Why else would they break into your old friend's place?” asks Johnny. “You said it yourself, they had nothing to steal. And a few days ago it was your neighborhood.”

“Did it somehow escape your notice they mostly focused on you both times?”

“Yeah, I'm the best fighter,” Johnny says dismissively. “You always concentrate your forces to take out the biggest threat first. That's just common sense.”

“Oh, is it. Just common sense, huh.”

His stinging sarcasm is truly wasted on Johnny; he just nods thoughtfully and stares out the window. Daniel gives up with a heavy eye roll and returns his attention to the traffic rolling along Sherman.

Let Johnny ponder the frightful and mysterious forces of darkness aligning themselves against Daniel LaRusso, Mechanic. It's probably better this way. Keeps him distracted while Daniel sorts everything out.

The Saab is already in front of the house when they get home, yellow car in front of Johnny's yellow bike, all cozy and interfering and *hm*.

“Hey, Johnny?” he says. He pulls into the drive but keeps his head turned, considering the pair of vehicles.

“Yeah?”

“Did you pick your bike to match my and Susan's cars?”

“Course not,” he says.

It's impossible, of course, to know if he's lying. Daniel stares at him suspiciously from the corner of his eye as he puts the Ford into park.

Johnny unbuckles his seatbelt and moves to get out but some cunning instinct has Daniel waving a hand to forestall him. If Johnny gets out he won't see any reason to get back *in*, so it's better if Daniel just

handles the garage door. Smoother. He's going to be so smooth.

Except Johnny is still getting out. What the hell, no.

“Hey,” says Daniel. Johnny glances over as he rounds the car; under his gaze, he slows and stops. He waits. Daniel smiles a little and jerks his head towards the front seat. “Maybe get back in the car?”

Johnny's eyes shift. He blinks. He gets back in the car, sinking onto the bench seat slow like he's especially aware Daniel's watching. He smooths his palms down the tops of his thighs restlessly, an accidental showcase of what's on offer.

Daniel opens the garage door and performs a not-quite-jog back to hop behind the wheel and pull them into the cool interior. He glances sidelong at Johnny watching him and says brightly *sit tight.*

The garage door rattles loudly as he pulls it down to kiss the cement; the bright outside presses against its narrow rectangular windows, giving the barest relief to the gloomy box-lined space of the small garage. Johnny's pale head stands out against it all, turned slightly like he's listening for Daniel's approach.

Daniel comes along the driver's side again and braces his hands over the door. Johnny looks up at him, unblinking and expectant in the dark.

“You gotta stop looking at me like that,” says Daniel.

“No,” disagrees Johnny, and then: “Like what?”

The only possible response he can give is to open the door and walk across the bench seat on his knees. First contact: shoulders. Second contact: lips. Third contact: Johnny catches his hips. He guides him into place as Daniel settles over his lap, and then it's like two pieces of a machine locking into place.

Daniel sighs a little and thumps his forehead down along Johnny's clavicle, and Johnny's hands tighten over his hipbone. His breath stirs the hair on the back of his head.

“I would really like it,” muses Daniel, absently kneading the muscles banding those shoulders, “if your face wasn't constantly covered in bruises.”

“Yeah? Bruises aren't that big a deal. Not like I'm walking around with

my arm in a cast." And depressingly, he sounds like he really thinks this should make the difference to him.

Daniel raises his head and fixes him with a skeptical look, but this only seems to make Johnny want to smile some more at him. The man shakes him lightly by the hip and Daniel sways with the motion but continues to frown.

"Hey, it's not like I'm Paul Newman in that one movie," continues Johnny. "You know, the old one where he's Rocky Graziano? That's a —"

"I know who Rocky Graziano is," says Daniel, a little annoyed.

"He'd come in after his fights with a busted face, scare the fuck out of his kid? It was pretty funny."

He shifts over his lap. "Is that really what you want to be reminding me of right now? A handsome guy getting his face all messed up?"

"I'm saying it's not going to be like that," protests Johnny, and he's still smiling at him: that strange new smile that Daniel still can't quite read.

"Good," he says, leaning in again, because this is something they both understand, no problem. He bumps his nose against his cheek. "Because I like looking at you."

Johnny's arms come up and crush him against his chest, and then he's tipping them sideways and turning, spreading himself out beneath Daniel on the seat. Daniel cups him through his jeans and kisses him deep.

Johnny tilts his face into it so sweetly, it's almost easy to forget the bruising on his face, or the way they'd fought so well together and what that might mean for them, for Daniel. Who can worry about who or what he is when he's being told that above all, he's *wanted*? Because that's what Johnny tells him, what he has been telling him with every look and move for weeks. He wants Daniel. And unlike before, he doesn't seem to feel any conflict about it, doesn't seem interested in putting any limits or rules down to constrain it. He's all his.

Daniel begins to think about fucking him in the car. Does he want to do this in here? He won't be able to see the flush of Johnny's face as he works him open, but he'll be able to hear him in the hollow quiet. Johnny's usually pretty quiet during sex, even when his mouth is free;

Daniel wants to see if he can make him call out. He won't have to beg. Daniel will be satisfied with any noise, be it desperate groan or a loud victory cry. It's all good for him, the magic of Johnny's language all amounting to the same thing in the end – need and desire melting into relief, because Daniel's there, and he's handling it, and he's the only one.

“Think you could hold your legs open for me?” he asks between kisses. “How long could you do that?”

Movement in Johnny's throat as he swallows and breathes deep. His eyes travel along the ceiling of the garage before landing on Daniel's. “Long – long as you want me to,” he says.

Daniel grins.

A hammering knock rattles the garage door.

Daniel stops grinning. He raises his head in disbelief to look over to where Susan is standing outside, hand cupped against the small window so she can peer into the garage.

“I saw you pull in,” she calls through the thin siding. She doesn't seem to see them, but it doesn't matter, she doesn't give up: “I don't know what your deal is, but I need you to come inside like, right now.”

The only place Daniel needs to come inside right now is Johnny, surely. He looks back at Johnny to see if he agrees, but the other man has gone blank and is staring grimly at the ceiling again.

“Maybe she'll go away,” whispers Daniel, eyes on the generous outline of Johnny's dick. He's still so hard in his jeans for Daniel, it's not *fair*. He can practically feel it in his hand, the way it would slide and bounce as Daniel fucked him over the back of the seat.

“Guys, I'm not going away,” she says loudly. “I mean it! Look, this is an *emergency*.”

Daniel makes a faint sound of hurt and curls forward, thumping his head down over Johnny's stomach. A moment later, a hand lands in his hair with wordless comfort.

“You will not *believe* the day I've had,” continues Susan.

Chapter 53: The Importance of Being Susan, Act I

“Don't *look* at me like that,” Susan says when they emerge from the garage. “This is a crisis.”

Daniel pushes his mouth out and stalks past her towards the house, thinking unflattering thoughts about his friend, like how her makeup needs reapplying and her hair is a mess like she's been pulling at it and – oh, so it probably is an actual crisis. Great, just what he needs.

In the house he makes a beeline for the kitchen and fills the kettle. As he rummages around the cabinet by the sink looking for some of Mr. Miyagi's most calming tea, Susan starts in at his back:

“I'll never be able to show my face at the country club again, obviously. There's no telling who knows what, and you don't know what that place is like, okay—”

“I mean, I can guess,” says Daniel.

“It's a pit of vipers.”

“Hey, that was gonna be my guess,” says Daniel.

“The real question is, is anything going to make it back to my parents. I don't even want to think what they'd do with this kind of ammunition – I can just see my mother blaming my father for it, and then maybe their lawyers will drag it all out in front of an entire *courtroom* and before you know it, I might as well have taken a classified ad out in the paper. What if Paul finds out, Daniel? What then?”

Daniel finally locates the tea and his strainer and carries them over to set beside the warming kettle on the stove. He takes a short, preparatory breath and looks up.

Susan is practically hovering in the air over the floor, her anxiety somehow making her entire body look longer, drawn and strained.

Johnny, meanwhile, has taken the seat at the end of the table and is slouched back in the chair, long legs sprawling like he has never been more at ease in his life. He is resting his face on a fist and watching Susan thoughtfully. His hair looks very soft and very shiny and very

pullable, falling over his forehead into his eyes.

“Okay,” says Daniel, clearing his throat. He rounds the counter and steps up to her, taking hold of her shoulders gently and steering her back a couple feet towards the table. “Why don't you sit and explain from the beginning. I'll make us some tea, and—”

“I need a drink,” she says bleakly, folding down into a chair with an awkward bump.

“Yes, exactly,” he says, encouraging. “Tea.” She stares up at him. “Look, I don't think we have anything else in the house, okay. You kinda go through it pretty quick these days,” he adds, pointed.

Her smudged eyes widen. “I cannot believe you are judging me right now—”

“There's my stuff,” says Johnny. They both look over at him, and he offers a small, closed-mouth smile. Daniel tries to communicate with his eyes that his sweet, sexy boyfriend should stop talking; his sweet, sexy moron does not seem to get the message, because: “From my condo? It's in the plastic bag under the sink.”

Susan is on her feet and pushing past him in an instant. Daniel's shoulders slump.

He flaps an arm after her. “Great. Sure, why not. I mean, it's a Sunday and you've already apparently had a rough day, why would you want to talk this all out in a healthy and productive manner? Love your priorities, Suze. Classic.”

With a rustle of plastic in the kitchen, Susan straightens from the sink cupboard with a half-full handle of Stoli. She holds it aloft with both hands like someone discovering the holy grail.

Daniel drags a chair out from the table and collapses in it. A second later, Johnny scoots his own chair closer; Daniel slides him a displeased look. Johnny blinks and, after a critical couple seconds of intent thought, scoots his chair closer again. Daniel gives up and lets the man put his hand on his knee.

He doesn't think it's *so* much to ask that his friend not make him sit by watching as she makes bad choices. She's already stopped him from having sex. Like, there are limits.

Daniel turns his head to say over his shoulder, “You know, you're so

worried about Paul finding out whatever-it-is but not about showing up hungover to work first thing Monday morning. Don't you think that's kinda messed up?"

She returns to the table with the bottle sans a glass and gives him a disdainful look. "Oh *no*, someone working in show business is a hard drinker? You're right, he'll can me for sure." She perches on the edge of her chair and mutters while twisting the cap, "As if that man doesn't pop aspirin like they're Tic Tacs every morning."

Daniel never enjoys hearing about Susan's work situation, it's so depressing. This is why books are better than movies; any drama that happened in the making-of a book just ends up being a footnote in a biography he doesn't have to read. You can forget there are people involved entirely. Ever since Susan got this job, he can't watch so much as a commercial without wondering which awful person won that particular day's contract negotiations.

Casting about for a distraction, he thinks about Johnny's hand on his knee. The strength and size of it: how it looked when Johnny was curling it around his dick and pleasuring himself for Daniel. How it might look opening Johnny up – even with an awkward angle, Johnny'd probably do it if Daniel asked him to. He'd be eager to do it. Daniel wonders if he'd have to tell him to be more careful with himself, like he had when Johnny was jerking off. Daniel needs to make sure he rewards him appropriately, he doesn't want to be stingy with praise and encourage the wrong behavior.

He looks up from the hand into his eyes, and Johnny goes perfectly still and receptive, because he's always just known when Daniel was thinking about this, about them.

"So, I was at the country club," says Susan from the other side of the table. Daniel shuts his eyes.

God, life is so unfair.

Chapter 54: The Importance of Being Susan, Act II

Maybe, Susan tells them, it was a mistake from the very beginning – not just choosing to meet at the country club, though god knows that didn't help anything, because Ali is always in such a *mood* whenever she is back there, what gives – but meeting up with her in the first place? She should never have done it. She should have told her she was busy or something. For like, forever.

“Didn't she ask you to be her Maid of Honor? And you said yes?” asks Daniel. “I think that involves seeing her sometimes. Also there's the whole, y'know. Best friends thing.”

Susan takes a neat swig of the Stoli. She doesn't react at all to the full-brunt taste of the vodka-with-no-chaser; Daniel watches her fixed, distant expression and feels an unwelcome trickle of worry.

“Okay, look, never mind that,” he says hastily, trying again, “How about – how about you just take us through it. Like you said, you were at the country club.”

“I was at the country club,” echoes Susan, and she lifts the Stoli again.

THE COUNTRY CLUB

“I'm only interested in fairness,” insisted Mrs Morris. “That's what Prop 187 is about – fairness. Californians pay plenty in taxes as it is, and that's why I think This Thing That Would Really Piss Off Your Friend Daniel LaRusso.”

“Yeah,” said Susan indifferently, looking around in private dismay at the room full of people who came early for the Pete Wilson fundraising event she had been careful to check started an hour after her own plans. “Absolutely. That Thing That Would Really Piss Off My Friend Daniel LaRusso is *so* important. Totally.”

The woman made a pleased humming sound. “It's simply a matter of who pays in.”

“And I pay in *every day*,” said Susan gamely, but then she realized her glass of soda was empty, and she became a lot less game. She leaned forward to catch the eye of the bartender. Meanwhile, at her side, Mrs Morris continued droning on about population growth and percentages and other hideous things.

Why had she told Ali to meet here? What had she been thinking? Okay, she knew what she had been thinking; she'd thought: what's the safest, straightest place I know? This strategy had served her well in the past. She didn't understand why it abruptly felt so loudly *wrong.* Nothing had changed, so why suddenly had everything changed?

“So! I haven't seen your mother lately,” said Mrs Morris – clearly angling for some update for the gossip circle, how tediously transparent. Pathetic, pathetic. Almost as pathetic as Susan herself was, hanging around this old place to be a third-rate spectacle for the Sunday crowd. *Well, you do hate not being the center of attention,* said the Marty in her head. Shut up, shut up!

“She's really got into quantum healing recently, it's sort of taking a lot of her time,” said Susan, fiddling with her empty glass.

She took a break from trying to telepathically coax the bartender down their way and looked around again, hoping to find Ali had

materialized, ready to save her from this scene. Ali had that indomitable moral outlook, she'd devoted years of hard work and study to healing the sick and all that other good-person-stuff; sure, this was perhaps not the highest crisis in the land, but maybe she'd make an exception for Susan? Good ole Susan? Swoop in and save her, please? Susan promised not to swoon too obviously.

“How are things going with your young man?” asked Mrs Morris. “The – oh, what did he do again?”

She wanted to make Susan say it; she wanted Susan to feel small as she did. Little did she know, Susan's actual truth made the idea of dating a mechanic from Van Nuys seem adorably quaint. God, if only! Susan could give Daniel a whole pack of short twerpy kids to raise and then retire to the backyard with a radio and a cooler full of mimosas—

(“I'm not sure how I feel about you calling our hypothetical kids twerpy,” Daniel breaks in to say, because seriously, his children deserve better. “And you know what, I'm actually of *average* height, thanks. And look at my cousin Louie! The kids aren't destined to be short.”

“The kids are destined to grow up without a father if you don't let me just get through this,” says Susan.)

So anyway, Susan smiled as if besotted: the smile of a woman who went home every day to a man who gave her flowers or chocolates or whatever, or maybe mind-blowing cunnilingus. “He's a small business owner – runs an auto shop. He's *great* with his hands.”

Mrs Morris's own smile faltered, but only by millimeters and only at the edges; she was very good. Decades of practice at being a miserable wretched cow, Susan supposed.

She gave up on trying to will the presence of the bartender; he wasn't going to come over and like, why would he. Tips for soda weren't as good as tips for real drinks. If Susan hadn't been trying to be so good for Ali, she could have solved both their problems real quick.

She set her glass down and pushed it away, flashed a fake smile at Mrs Morris, and leaned back from the counter and that's when she saw her across the room,

and her fiancee.

“What's *he* doing here,” muttered Susan, momentarily forgetting she had company.

“Oh, haven't you met Gregory?” asked Mrs Morris with some surprise. “Martha tells me he's an oncologist. Great prospects.”

Susan shrugged. “I guess people are always getting cancer. Not at risk of running out of customers, is he.” And Mrs Morris maybe didn't like that response, but Susan wasn't paying attention any more. It was hard to pay too much attention to anything else when Ali was in the room.

She'd cut her hair. Gone was the ash blonde length she'd studiously kept tied back all through medical school: the strands escaping her braid to curl over her shoulder, often catching the light and turning her luminous. It was chopped above her chin now, floating around her face light and free. Like at any moment she could take flight and disappear.

She used to tell Susan when she would do anything to her hair; was that something friends outgrew? Or was it the friend that was outgrown.

“...moving to Denver after the wedding, it all sounds *very* adventurous,” said Mrs Morris.

What?

“What?” said Susan.

(“What?” says Daniel. “Denver? What do you mean, she's moving to Denver?”)

“She's moving to Denver,” said Mrs Morris.

(“She's moving to fucking Denver!” Susan shouts to the heavens, or really just his kitchen ceiling.

“Since when? She hasn't said anything about Denver. Is that even a

real place? Who moves to Denver?" says Daniel.)

"Who moves to *Denver?* " demanded Susan.

"Alison Schwarber, apparently," said Mrs Morris archly; then, flush with the triumph of having finally delivered a dagger of some wounding efficacy to Susan, she picked up her glass of white wine and turned back towards her stupid fundraiser.

("I hope you didn't do anything rash after that," says Daniel without too much hope.

Susan looks at him narrowly. "What do you think I did?"

"I know what I'd do," says Johnny.)

Susan turned back to the counter and leaned forward to call out, "Hey, Chuck! You can stop ignoring me. I'll have a vodka cranberry."

("Well," she says to him with acid defensiveness, "I *didn't*.")

She paused sickly, curled forward on folded forearms and thinking about sitting across from Ali and Gregory for the next hour or so as they smiled and held hands and dreamed of Colorado.

She looked up at Chuck. "Actually, could you make that a double?"

("Uh huh," says Daniel.)

Chapter 55: The Importance of Being Susan, Act III

ALI
(*cheerful, going in for the hug*)
I can't believe you wanted to meet here. What's up, you wanted to torture yourself for old times' sake?

(*Her smile falters a little as Susan steps quickly back after a perfunctory squeeze; she glances over her shoulder at her fiancee as if for reassurance, or perhaps simply awkwardly remembering his presence.*)

SUSAN
(*eyes avoidant; she looks deeply bored, like she would prefer not to be there*)
You have no idea. Anyway, they have our table ready. Greg, how are you? Didn't realize you were coming today.

GREGORY
(*hand brushing the small of his fiancee's back in wordless comfort*)
Heard about the fundraiser this afternoon, thought I'd tag along and check it out.

SUSAN
(*over her shoulder, casual*)
Nothing better to do on a Sunday afternoon?

ALI
She's just joking.

(*Susan is not joking.*)

“Did you know, she cut her hair? In this like, bob,” says Susan, hollow. She gestures with her free hand at her head, an erratic sketch in the air that doesn't really do much to capture said bob, or at least Daniel hopes so for Ali's sake.

Daniel thinks about it for a second, trying to picture Ali with shorter hair; yeah, she could probably pull that off. It's Ali, after all.

“Okay,” he says cautiously. He leans forward in his chair and pats her knee. “Sounds like she's making a lot of changes. How did that make

you feel?"

"I told her I was gay," says Susan faintly; by the end of the sentence her voice loses all depth of sound, the word *gay* the barest of breathy sketches on the air. Daniel swears her pupils even shrink a little. Boy, she's got issues; everybody he knows got so many issues.

On the tail of that thought, as if summoned by dark cosmic forces, his front door jangles; it opens and they all look over. Chozen has returned.

(*Susan glances around to catch the eye of the waiter; she motions neatly to her glass before finally looking at Ali and Gregory; she smiles, close-mouthed.*)

ALI

(*determinedly bright*)

So! How's work? You must be really busy lately, feel like I haven't seen you in almost two months.

SUSAN

Yeah, pretty busy. Paul's got this new client, they're in the honeymoon phase – gotta roll out the red carpet, make sure everything's perfect, you know? Can't let the man know he's actually a gigantic asshole until after he has delivered on all his big promises and it's too late to back out. He's practically got me living on-call, my hours are all over the place. Between that and the commute, I don't really have a lot of spare time.

ALI

(*smiling*)

The commute, right. How is life back in the valley? Daniel must be so thrilled having you around all the time.

SUSAN

Oh, you know him. Loves the company.

Immediate reactions of relief and joy from Susan and Johnny; cue the studio audience whooping and cheers, thinks Daniel. He lets his eyes roll to the ceiling.

He should really change his locks. Johnny needs a spare key anyway.

He could get a whole new set made. Except, who's he kidding, Susan or Johnny would probably just make Chozen a copy. Maybe they'd make several copies and start handing them out to people on the street, anyone who looks a little queer and like a lot of trouble. Daniel would need a whole new sets of dishes, he only owns five plates.

“I thought you were kidnapped by your agent,” he says sourly.

“Chozen, I've had the *worst* day,” cries Susan.

“Hey, man,” says Johnny.

Chozen trudges to the table and pulls out the fourth chair across from Daniel and collapses in it. He looks somber and grave, like he has just received some very bad news. Daniel fights it for a couple seconds before breaking and asking, okay, what happened.

“I paid the hostess to fake a call from Hong Kong, ask to speak to Chin,” he says heavily. “Then the appetizer arrived, she took the call – and I slipped out.”

“Wow, that's so sad. Did you even get to eat any of the appetizer?” Daniel wonders if he should start on supper – it's getting kinda late and none of them got to actually eat anything at the barbecue, after all.

For some reason the others look at him with pity. Ridiculous. He's not the one who ran away from his agent in the middle of a dinner. He tilts his head and looks at Chozen. “How's your dignity feeling right now?” he asks keenly.

Chozen ignores him and reaches out to capture Susan's hand; she turns to him instantly and covers his hand with her other. The Stoli is left on the table. Daniel seethes.

“Susan, tell me of your terrible day,” says Chozen with ardent empathy. “Maybe it'll make me feel better.”

“I fear I'll never recover,” she tells him tearfully.

“Ali showed up looking like Princess Diana,” says Daniel loudly. "And for some reason this made Susan spontaneously come out."

ALI

I guess it's busy all around, then. Must be the time of year or something. Between wrapping things up with work and the wedding plans, I feel like I haven't had a moment to myself in forever.

GREGORY
(*hugging Ali around the shoulders*)
She loves it, though.

SUSAN
Does she, Greg?

ALI
(*reaching up to pat Gregory's hand*)
Honey, why don't you go mingle with the um, over there? Give us girls a chance to chat alone.

(*Gregory presses a kiss to her temple and departs; Ali turns back to Susan*)

Okay, what the hell is going on with you? Are you mad at me?

SUSAN
(*neutral, just absolutely, totally calm and collected*)
When were you going to tell me you're moving away?

She gives him an ugly look. “Sometimes I hate you *so* much.”

“Hey, I'm just trying to make sense of all this.”

“Can you please, for once, try to be a little sympathetic here? Chozen's sympathetic.”

Chozen nods in grave agreement, as if years of avoiding his uncle and lying about himself to Yukie and Mr. Miyagi are some kind of deeply-felt life experience giving him a position of authority in all matters related to the closet.

“I am being sympathetic,” protests Daniel, throwing out an arm. “I'm totally sympathetic. Look, I think it was really brave of you (*ugh!*) and long overdue (*go to hell, Daniel*) finally being honest with your best friend. Being, you know, open about yourself and – hey, Johnny kind of came out to his friends too. What a banner day for the Van Nuys crowd, right, guys?”

If he wasn't intent on eventually getting his house back to himself, he might consider opening a clinic – a retreat, of sorts. Come on down to Daniel's House and discover the New You? He wonders how much he could charge for a week. He'd definitely have to fix the bathroom lock. Liability issues there. What if someone's New You was a pervert?

Susan and Chozen look to Johnny, who doesn't move so much as an inch. It feels a little like Daniel is posing for a photo next to a statue, slipping his leg under a stone hand. Except the hand is very warm, and Johnny's hair looks very soft.

Susan says, halting, “You came out to – who. Who did—”

“Tom. And Robert,” says Johnny.

She stares at him dimly. “*Why?*” And apparently this glimpse of another person's misery gives her the strength to reach again for the liquor bottle. She gestures with it before taking a small, neat swig. “God, Johnny, I know they host some of the most interminable dinner parties known to man, but I swear there are other ways to get yourself uninvited.” She shrugs. “Just make an enemy of their wives, easy. Works every time.”

“You can't be enemies with Ashley Brown,” says Johnny. “It's not possible. I could be on death row and she'd send me brownies. She'd probably make extra for the guy throwing the switch on the chair.”

Susan pulls a face. “There's something wrong with that girl. I mean, besides the fact that she's twenty-two. No one is that nice.”

“Jen does hate you, though,” he adds helpfully. “Like, a lot. If your name comes up in conversation, she always gets this one look on her face, and we all pretend not to notice.”

She shrugs and sniffs wetly. “Tommy's in love with me. I'd hate me too.”

And then she starts to look a little cheered; hard to say what's done it, the alcohol or the idea of Tommy wife somewhere out there, making a mental voodoo doll in her image. Daniel isn't judging but also, he thinks in many ways, she's kind of a terrible person.

“Any man could be in love with you,” says Chozen, intent and serious like he is quoting a piece of ancient Hollywood Buddhist wisdom. (Stick to stunts, Chozen.) “I mean, if he was into breasts and things.”

“Can we get back to the story?” asks Daniel. “Why are you so upset? Don't tell me Ali reacted badly. I mean, she's always been—”

“Yeah, she was always so enlightened about you guys,” she says, gesturing at Daniel and Johnny in one devastating dismissal, as if what had happened between the three of them back in school hadn't resulted in Ali not speaking to Daniel or even looking at him for months; as if their entire friendship since hasn't been built on an unspoken bittersweet bedrock of *what if*.

“Suze,” he says clearly, “what did she say?”

ALI
(*taken aback; dismayed*)
I mean, we aren't? Or, that is – look, nothing's decided for sure. Gregory was offered a position at the teaching hospital at UCHealth, they would likely hire me on as well.

SUSAN
(*cutting her off*)
You don't need to be hired on as somebody's spouse, you're a great doctor all on your own.

ALI
(*bemused, patience fraying*)
Okay, not that you... actually know what kind of doctor I am, but thank you. I am good. That's not the point, this isn't some paternalistic favor they'd be doing for Gregory. It's quite common with universities to hire spouses together. It's just – neat. Efficient.

SUSAN
(*to the side, muttering*)
And god forbid anything not be neat and efficient.

(*Susan takes another small drink and glances across the table to find Ali has put her head back. She is staring at her, expression serious. Susan forgets herself and accidentally stares back.*)

ALI
(*quiet*)
You know, ever since I asked you to be my Maid of Honor, it's like you've done nothing but pull away. At first I tried to give you some space, especially with everything you said went down with that guy Martin – didn't want to seem like I was rubbing the wedding in your

face, I guess.

(*Ali leans forward, hurt folding beneath measured indignation.*)

Except now you're treating me like I'm somebody else, or like, like I'm everybody else. What did I do? Could you just please tell me, so we can talk about it?

(*Ali's expression flinches, and she glances over her shoulder at the rest of the room; her tone turns a little pleading.*)

Because I've been dying to talk to you about this move. It feels like I have nobody I can talk to about it, nobody in my camp. All I have is my mother, who is so thrilled it sets my teeth on edge – I swear most days she forgets I'm actually a doctor too, she's so obsessed. Constantly trying to give me advice about how to socialize with Gregory's colleagues – and then there's my father, who doesn't want me to be so far away from home, like I'm still a little girl. And then, of course, there's Gregory, who won't shut up about how great the winters are in the mountains.

(*She reaches across the table and lays a hand over Susan's forearm*.)

Susan, I miss you. I need my best friend. Where have you been?

SUSAN
(*numb*)
Her name wasn't Martin.

Chapter 56: What She Said

(*What? Whose?*)

It's an old fantasy, so embarrassing Susan hasn't actually let herself play the whole thing out in her head for years now; she tells herself she left it behind in college – college, that incredible, brief, beautiful, torturous period in her life when she lived with Ali in a small two-bedroom apartment down in Westwood.

The fantasy: she doesn't have to say anything at all. Ali just knows.

And Ali, being Ali, does something about it.

(*What are you saying? Stop playing around, Susan.*)

Years of confusion and denial bloom into something Meant To Be, the unlikeliest true love success story since that one sports movie from the 80s where the twerp ends up with the hot girl – Susan's the hot girl, to be clear. And Ali's not really a twerp, she just seems to like them for some reason.

See? Even in her fantasies they don't really fit.

(*I don't understand. This, this whole time?*)

But it turns out, with women, it doesn't have to make sense for you to want it. Or maybe it's that way with everyone, and she just hadn't had experience wanting.

How many boyfriends did she go through? Creating increasingly complex lists to check off: maybe if he's smart, and clean, makes at least eighty thousand a year and is not boring – but they were all always so boring.

The magazine in her hair salon sometimes says, picture your perfect date. But Susan can't think of anything more perfect than one of those free mornings in college near the end of their last semester. Ali would already be dressed for the day but Susan would still be lazy in her nightgown. They would tuck themselves up on the small loveseat and trade newspapers back and forth, complaining about the job search.

In her daydream, Ali finally tosses the classifieds aside and kneels forward, puts her soft hand high up on Susan's bare thigh.

(*So – you've lied to me. For years.*)

Is it fair to call it lying if the story started being told before she even had a voice?

(*Oh my god, I'm such an idiot. This is why your parents think you're dating Daniel. I just thought you were trying to make them mad.*)

When she first told Daniel, he wasn't surprised.

How did you know before me? she asked.

Just returning the favor, I guess, he said. You knew about me too.

(*Of course... that means Daniel must know – how long has he – ? I feel so stupid. Have you two been laughing at me this whole time? In your own little club?*)

When are you going to tell Ali? he asked, another time. I think you should just tell her. She's your best friend.

And Susan thought about the Ali of her old college fantasy: that impossible imaginary girl. She needed to be protected from the world; she needed to be hidden out of sight. She needed to never have existed.

She can never know, she said.

(*I feel like I don't even know you.*)

Chapter 57: Encino Revisited

“She said I lied to her," recited Susan woodenly. "That she didn't feel like she even knew me. Said she needed to think. Then she got up and left – didn't even stop to collect Greg on her way out,” she adds with unidentifiable scorn.

The table is silent for a moment. Susan doesn't meet anyone's eyes, probably hiding her tears. Chozen silently rubs her hand. Daniel chews his thumbnail and stares at the table, thinking hard.

“You should let her calm down and then go talk to her again,” says Johnny. They all look at him in surprise, but he only looks at Susan. His right shoulder lifts in a small shrug. “She might have... associations. Because of me, I mean.”

Daniel blinks and keeps thinking.

“Not everything's about you,” says Susan, sounding offended at the idea that anything could be about him. “That was a lifetime ago. And anyway, do you really think she didn't tell me all about it back then?”

“Did she?” says Johnny. “Are you sure?”

“*Yes.*”

“Why? You didn't.”

Susan flinches. For some reason, she looks at Daniel after and says acidly, “Thanks, thanks for this.”

He opens his mouth to say – something, anyway, probably an objection, but she isn't waiting around. She gets up and walks swiftly from the room. They hear her bedroom door close hard seconds later.

“When I said I'd hold her while she cries,” says Chozen, “I was mostly joking.” He looks up between them. “I mean, I still will.”

“What did you mean?” Daniel asks Johnny.

Johnny looks at him with very still eyes. Eventually he shrugs again; finally takes his hand from Daniel's knee in order to rub the back of his neck as his gaze crawls away. “I knew I was gay before I started dating her,” is all he says.

Daniel stops thinking and decides: “I'm calling Ali.” He gets up from the table.

“Uh,” says Johnny at his back.

“No, no I cannot witness this,” declares Chozen.

Daniel twists to glare at him as he reaches for the phone on the wall. “What are you talking about?”

“I do not know this Ali, only hear endless stories about her from you two sad people – or three?” he adds, casting an interrogative look at Johnny, who thinks about it before nodding his head from side-to-side. “But this will not be helped by your interfering, mothering nature.”

“Mothering?” repeats Daniel in disbelief.

Chozen lifts his hands into the air. “I have made my objections. I now cannot be held responsible for anything that happens.”

“Mothering,” says Daniel again. He raises his voice as Chozen disappears behind the wall of the kitchen, heading for the hallway. “It's called being a *caring person*, you maladjusted freak. Didn't hear you complaining about my *mothering* when you were in the hospital!” He looks up at Johnny, who is suddenly standing before him. “Can you believe that guy?”

Johnny takes a firm hold of his hips, fingers sliding beneath his shirt to brush at skin, and then – there's really no other word for it – he looms over him. “Are you sure you should call her?” he says. “Maybe – maybe you should leave it alone. At least for tonight.”

He looks at him in amazement. “What exactly do you think I'm going to say? I'm just making sure she's okay, that there's no misunderstandings here. Look, you think Susan has issues now, can you imagine what she'll be like if she and Ali stop talking? Do you know what my life will be like, if they're not talking? *I* can! And I won't let that just happen. I'm not just going to stand here being passive.”

Johnny's mouth flattens. While he's thinking or whatever, Daniel tucks the phone between his ear and shoulder and punches in Ali's number. It begins ringing, and he absently drops a hand to Johnny's wrist, tucking his thumb over the thin skin at his pulse in wordless comfort.

Thump... thump... guy really has an impressive resting heart rate... why is that hot? Also hot: the slight-but-striking acceleration the longer they touch each other.

“Hello?” says Ali in his ear. Daniel jerks in surprise against the wall, and Johnny's hands tighten over his hips in warning, pulling him closer.

“Ali!” he says loudly, catching himself on Johnny's chest. “Hey!” *Stop that,* he mouths to Johnny, who does not stop anything; in fact, he widens his eyes in a way Daniel is sure is meant to be meaningful, but is actually just really distracting.

“I suppose I should have expected this,” she says.

He sighs. “C'mon, don't say it like that.”

“And how am I saying it, Daniel?”

“Like, I don't know, like I'm taking sides or something. I'm just calling to check on you, see how you're feeling. Sounds like it was maybe a, a bumpy afternoon.” And they didn't even get attacked by a gang of ninjas. How is this Daniel's life.

“Look,” says Ali in his ear, and meanwhile, Johnny is bending to press his mouth at the crux of Daniel's neck and shoulder – and he's not doing anything with it but still, “I said I needed to process, and I meant it. It's kind of a lot, realizing your best friend has this whole other life she hasn't been telling you about.”

“Well, see, that's why I called,” says Daniel, craning his neck away from Johnny, but actually this is a stupid tactic, because it just gives the guy more space to maneuver; he shoves at him, to no avail. “I'm sure the conversation was – um, fraught. But I just wanted to say, like – Ali, look, it's *Susan*. She's still the same person you've always known. This whole thing it's, it's just – it's complicated.”

“I don't see how it's all that complicated, actually,” says Ali. “Do you know how stupid I feel? All the – god, Daniel, are you kidding me? It's been *years*. Years of me telling her every stupid, petty, *embarrassing* detail about my love life, and it turns out I know nothing about hers? How do you think that makes me feel? What am I supposed to think?”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” he says, and he mouths again *stop it*, but Johnny isn't looking at Daniel's face and thus, comprehensively does not respond. “I just wanted to say, I don't think – you shouldn't like,

read into it? She had her reasons for not telling you."

"What reasons?" demands Ali, and oh wow, she actually sounds more upset than when she picked up, Daniel is really not fixing this yet, "What signals have I ever given on the countless trips to gay bars that shouted *yes! let's keep lying to Ali*?"

He takes a hand off Johnny's chest in order to rub his forehead. Tactical mistake: Johnny presses closer. How was that even possible?

"I mean, it's not that simple," he tries to explain, wriggling ineffectually in protest. "There's the idea of it, but it's – it's different when it's personal? Or when someone has feelings for someone—"

He almost swallows his tongue. Johnny goes still. He raises his head and stares at Daniel in disbelief.

"What?"

Fuck?? he frantically shouts silently at Johnny, who definitely sees it this time; he only shakes his head wordlessly.

"Daniel, what do you mean?"

He takes a breath, and he has to believe by the time he blows it out again he'll have come up with a brilliant solution to this moment, because otherwise why continue breathing at all, right? Not like he might have betrayed one of his oldest friends while also simultaneously irrevocably changing the nature of his friends' relationship forever and ever and ever and ever.

Johnny abruptly lets go of him in favor of snatching the phone. He also plants a hand on his chest and lightly shoves; Daniel stumbles back, mostly because he is still numb with chagrin.

Johnny raises the phone to his ear and says with preternatural calm, "Ali."

Daniel stares, too shocked to do anything but watch.

Johnny's eyes flick to him and down, tawny eyelashes concealing. He quarter-turns away. "It's Johnny." He pauses, listening. "Lawrence. Yeah, I know. Look – you shouldn't listen to him. You know how he is, right? Stupid. Thinks he knows everything."

Daniel straightens up while somehow relaxing from his full-body-

clench. He blinks and the image is still the same: Johnny looking seriously into space while listening to the phone at his ear.

“It's a long story,” says Johnny. “Just – talk to Susan again. That's the only thing to do here. Anything else is a waste of everyone's time.”

Daniel steps forward uncertainly, reaching out to touch Johnny's waist. The man turns automatically, eyes meeting his.

“There's nothing else to say,” says Johnny into the phone. "Now you know the facts. Up to you to decide from here."

He pauses, and he goes somewhere else behind his eyes, somewhere Daniel can't follow. But his free hand comes up to grip Daniel's wrist.

“Ali,” he says. “It was – really good to hear your voice.”

And then he replaces the phone on the hook.

Chapter 58: On the Nature of This Thing, Book One

Hell of a way to end a phone call, Daniel could but does not say. He is still caught in the churning wake of his own mistake. The arid shock in Ali's voice has left an echo that is still bouncing around the walls of his brain. Some things you can't take back. You really think he'd have learned that one by now.

Johnny looks down to where he is holding Daniel's hand against his waist. He steps in close. Looming again.

“I guess I should go tell Susan,” says Daniel. He drags his tongue over the edge of his teeth, half-wishing it would get cut. “Warn her, I mean.”

And beg forgiveness? That should probably wait until the shockwave has fully passed. He's never been good at apologies. His rushing desire to fix everything getting ahead of everyone else's need to process. *Hurry up so we can just be good again, please.* God, what's wrong with him.

“No,” says Johnny. He tilts his head, face barely brushing Daniel's own. His breath is quiet and steady, almost ruminative. He says quietly into Daniel temple, “Think probably she's had enough bad news for one day, don't you.”

His eyes flinch into a blink. “Right.” He glances down and, finding the view taken up entirely by Johnny's waiting body, looks away. He curses under his breath and steps around Johnny, who is too surprised to resist. “*Right*,” he says again, and he crosses the dining area to the back connecting door and lets himself outside.

The sun has slipped below the horizon, casting the sky into a deep, troubled purple and transforming his wrecked backyard into an unfamiliar war-torn landscape of shadows and unseen tripping hazards. Neighboring houselights wink over the top of the fence line, diffusing just enough light to make the place feel surrounded. It looks smaller than he remembered it feeling when he first bought the place.

He doesn't have a deck to sit on, so instead, he perches on a stack of broken lumber. He pushes his hands over his face, palms cupping his eyes, fingers dragging his hair back.

Fuck. Don't get involved. Such a simple rule and yet he keeps failing to follow it.

He senses Johnny step up to him and drops his hands but doesn't look up. He shakes his head and says quietly, “I can't believe I did that.”

Johnny says, “I can.”

Daniel looks sharply up, but it's hard to make out the other man's expression in the evening gloam. His stomach tenses, his throat goes tight. “Yeah?” he rasps.

“I mean, it's what you do,” he says simply, and he folds down to kneel on the ground in front of the stack of lumber, automatically tucking his heels beneath him. His eyes are serious and intent.

“It is?” asks Daniel. There's no bracing himself for this conversation, he can already tell. Half of talking to Johnny has been as easy as talking to himself; the other half, like voluntarily putting his hand down a garbage disposal.

Johnny says, “Yeah. You pick and you poke and you keep shoving at a problem until something gives.” He leans forward, swaying close, lashes falling as he looks at Daniel's mouth. His breath is soft on his face. “You just don't know when to quit.”

Daniel has no idea what is going through that head right now. His body is an offering but his words, they're so—

“It's not like that,” he insists.

Johnny's face turns a little like a blind man following a sound. “It's not?”

Daniel stares at the still lines of his face, the serene veil of his eyelids. He doesn't move to touch him. It suddenly seems vital that he make Johnny understand – that this is something about himself that can be understood. Maybe if he puts it all into words, words that can be arranged into a coherent narrative, maybe, then.

“You make me sound horrible,” he says, and even as Johnny is shaking his head, he hurries to explain, “But it's like, if you see a problem, and you understand it – shouldn't you do something about it? If you know in your gut something is wrong—”

“How do you know?” asks Johnny. “How do you ever know?”

“You just *do*,” he says helplessly. “You know. There's a voice. There's always a voice, even if you don't always want to listen.”

Johnny's eyelids lift and he looks right at him, eyes startling clear. “I don't have that voice.”

“Of course you do. Everybody does. I told you, they just don't—”

“I hit you, didn't I,” says Johnny.

Daniel stops, startled. He subsides a little, watchful. Johnny notices; his mouth dents at one corner and his eyes move over him as if cataloging everything there is to see, from the bend of his knees and elbows to the slack hands hanging between his legs. Daniel's done alright in life, but he's never met another person who looked at him like this. There's no explaining it, no defending against it.

Johnny abruptly rises and in one fluid motion strips off his shirt. His chest is pale, several shades lighter than his neck and arms, and dappled with bruising that makes Daniel instinctively clench his jaw – he is brushing fingers over a purpling spot high along his ribs before he is even aware of reaching out. Johnny leans into it, past the point where he must feel an ache from the bruise.

“Night we first met. You remember?” says Johnny, but not like it's a question. His eyes catch the backyard light and gleam and he says in a strange, dreamlike tone, “I put you down.”

He places his hands down on the lumber on either side of Daniel and hitches up over him, not quite straddling but somehow still giving the impression of riding him. Daniel's hands drift up over his pecs, the solid span of his shoulders, and Johnny flows against him.

“I hit you,” he says, “for no reason besides you were talking to Ali, and she'd dumped me. And Daniel – there was no part of me that said, maybe this is wrong. I put you down on the ground and I went home,” and Johnny dips to drag his mouth along his temple to say roughly, softly into his ear, “and I didn't think of you again that whole night – or at all until I saw you the next day at school.”

Daniel doesn't like this memory, and he doesn't like the strange, affectless way Johnny recounts it. His grip tightens half-consciously, pulling Johnny in tight so he can mouth at his stomach, hoping to distract them both. He's not thinking very clearly; it's kinda been a full day, okay.

But Johnny continues, relentless above him: “You see, it was something I could do, and what's more, *wanted* to do – so I did it. And you couldn't stop me, so that was as good as meant to be in my book.”

Daniel strains up and bites over a nipple, a little harder than he usually would; Johnny's breathing stutters. He keeps moving against Daniel, the hot, hard encasement of his dick dragging against his torso, because Johnny likes displaying himself for him, doesn't he. Likes putting on a show, like he did on the night he's talking about.

Johnny keeps talking, because Daniel hasn't told him to fucking stop.

“You see, without her, there was no voice beside my stepdad's and my sensei's,” he says. “Even then, I think I knew, I needed something else. A different voice to fill me up. Just to balance it out.”

Daniel doesn't want to hear about balance right now. He doesn't want to think about just being a counterweight to awful men. The shame and mortification of the phone call has been blotted out by a hunger, a possessive urge that tells him: look what's on offer here. You just gonna sit there or you gonna take it? Take what you should've back then.

He reaches around with both hands to grab him, kneading his ass through the jeans. He tucks his face and pulls at the front of Johnny's belt with his teeth, tasting and smelling that surprisingly pungent brand-spanking-new leather of the barely worn item. He takes his mouth away and says without looking up: help me with this.

Johnny's hands move instantly to unbuckle the belt. Daniel has to forestall them from shoving the jeans down entirely. He doesn't want to make this too easy. And anyway, Johnny looks good in these jeans. He'll look even better when they're broken in, and there's only one way to break in denim – put it to work.

Daniel eases a hand down the back, and it's a tight fit even with the give of the open fly. Johnny sways over him, strong hands catching Daniel's shoulders. His eyes are fixed down on him, unblinking.

Do you think it would've made a difference, back then, Daniel asks: if I'd fucked you, I mean.

(Never mind that Daniel hadn't known how to do anything like that back then. They would've figured it out, he's sure of it. There was only one reason he let that situation get as bad as it did between them and Ali and everything else, and it was because while it was happening,

while he was in the thick of it, it felt a little like anything was possible – like if he told Johnny something in the right tone, it might stop being words and become part of their reality.)

Daniel slides his hand further and crooks a firm finger, not hesitating to press through the heat. Johnny tries to widen his legs, but with the jeans still on, it just makes it harder for Daniel to move. He's fine with this, actually; he'll let Johnny figure it out, which he will eventually, if he wants it enough.

If I'd fucked you, he says clearly, would you still have been able to put me on the ground, like you did that one day at school?

Chapter 59: ...

It's hard when he remembers the only person his truth might matter to
is himself,
that he is the only person who can even tell the difference most of the
time.

the way he moves his body.
the direction he casts his gaze.
the words he chooses to say.
sometimes even the thoughts he allows himself to think—

these are the tools he has used to build his lifetime of lies.
because he may be a fag, but he was no chump.

what is the truth. does it exist;
who deserves to hear it? why
is honesty something owed
instead of something given?

(During his first year in law school, Robert had to take a course on criminal law and, with the same moral stubbornness that used to make him make everyone pray before a tournament when they were in middle school, he made it John's problem; *the court makes you swear to tell the truth*, he told him, *but they can't make you incriminate yourself.* As if John's truth could do anything else. And so he has remained silent; he'll suck a cock but that doesn't make him a sucker.)

see, his truth is generally without value,
but the rules of economics dictate value
rises along with scarcity. he gives daniel his honesty,
because it is the only thing he has to offer him.

it is not the first time he has given it to him. he hopes
this time ends differently, that daniel can tell the difference.

johnny shifts over him and the denim relaxes
enough for daniel to push his finger inside;
he tries to look away but daniel stops him. well? he demands.
johnny flexes around him, rocking down hungrily.

he tries to think honestly and goes, if you'd fucked me,
would you have actually been satisfied? or would you have wanted
everything else

and not stopped until you got it. because remember, don't you remember? don't you ever forget what happens when we're alone like this. the truth that comes over us, that truth the world would say is actually a lie, or if not a lie, then something that doesn't matter, because if they can't get what they think they deserve then they don't want to hear it, and if they can't hear it, then why even tolerate it, and you wouldn't have been able to accept that, would you, you would've picked, and poked, and shoved and where would you have been then, that boy who wanted to fight everything until it actually meant something, and then he didn't want to fight at all, and it's not quite a lie but it wasn't the truth either. johnny thinks all this but not in words he can say, he thinks it in a dense wild crackle of noise, and it is frustration and it is longing and it is resentment and it is oh-yes-please-more and it is emptiness begging to be filled and it is all a terrible echo chamber with no boundaries and no center and it is

well? daniel asks again, insistent.
yeah, says johnny, yeah, i still would've put you on the ground.

daniel doesn't look surprised; they both know the only thing that might have allowed
him to stop back then. johnny struggles to not resist as daniel takes his fingers away. clenching on nothing, cock still hard:
the resilience of a desire rarely sated and never killed, why can't it just please—

daniel tips his head against johnny's torso and tells his heated skin, the more control johnny gives him, the less he feels he has.

and it sounds like a No and it sounds like forever,
except then daniel drags johnny's jeans down his thighs
wraps a hand around his cock as he sways over him and he says:
i think you're lying, johnny. (see? his truth is worthless.)

and johnny thinks about what it would have actually been like, if that little fucking nightmare had climbed inside of him and made himself at home; what it would have been like to look up from his desk in class and meet those dark eyes and have the knowledge out there between them, exposed and crushable like a paper football sailing through the air: up for grabs if anyone was quick enough; what it would have been like to offer his body to the unexpected and live through the aftermath of it, every day a choice between prostrated pleasure and the work and pain of the dojo, tormenting and weakening him with thoughts of *there's someplace else you could be right now—*

daniel lightly pushes him then, gets johnny on his back in the dirt.
kneels between his legs and strips the jeans all the way off.
the night presses close to his bare skin: the hot valley air
trapped down, heavy with the weight of a day it can't yet let go.

you say you don't have a voice, says daniel
but you knew you needed ali. you thought you needed me.

and johnny is uncomfortable for the first time beneath daniel's hands.
his cock is still hard, of course it is, but he is blinking past pleading eyes
to the purple-pink wash of the sky against the roof of the house he'd painted.
you have a voice, insists daniel somewhere. johnny, you need to find it.

think about it, he urges, and his hands slip down again, coaxing,
like he might finger-fuck the voice out of hiding, or maybe that's just johnny wishing like always.

“You didn't stick around here for no reason,” Daniel tells him, and he's moving over Johnny like he's actually fucking him, or maybe just fucking the idea of it. “You didn't put your damn fist through a glass door back then because you thought everything was fine.”

No, breathes Johnny, tossing his head against the ground and what he's hearing, and because Daniel is twisting his fingers inside him, *that's not – it wasn't like—*

“I need you to find that voice, man,” he says doggedly. “You need to do it, for yourself and, and for me – I mean, look what happened tonight. I don't have all the answers here.”

“That's different,” he gasps, but Daniel shakes his head, uncompromising.

“You have to find that voice, because I can't be it for you.”

“You, you could?” he suggests. Encouraging, like Daniel's just having a hard time getting it up or something.

His fingers move inside him. He leans forward to command Johnny's gaze, and just like always, there is no choice and it is a relief, or at

least it is until Daniel says gently but clearly:

“Johnny, I don't want to be.”

Chapter 60

Terry was lounging by the window wearing a robe when John woke up the next morning.

The robe was made of shimmering black silk, edged in red and long enough to sweep his ankles, and John had no idea where it came from. The man had only been carrying a briefcase the night before – a briefcase that was empty but for the papers John refused to sign.

“It's half-past six,” remarked Terry without looking away from the window. “Quite unlike you to sleep in past dawn, John. Are you getting soft in middle age or did I just tire you out?”

Where the fuck could it have come from? If he hadn't been wearing it when he arrived, and if it wasn't in the briefcase, then he had to have left it in John's apartment at some point in the past. But where? He had to know John would have burned any silk he came across. So he must have hidden it. This was a premeditated robe. And wasn't that Terry all over: a smirking sly *fuck you* draped over his well-formed bare shoulders, a landmine of a reminder should John have come across it any other way. All that slippery softness, that thin veneer of civilization. It probably smelled of Terry's fragrance. It would probably be cool around John's cock if he jerked off into it, or if he pinned the man against the wall where he stood and pressed his thighs together and fucked him through it. He could picture the way it would pool on the floor if he got him on his knees. Maybe Terry had hidden it above one of the ceiling tiles in the bathroom.

He made himself stop looking around the studio. He sat up and swung his legs out of bed.

“Surprised you stuck around,” he said. “Would've thought you couldn't handle a night away from your soft bed these days.”

That wide mouth curled and his head went back a little in a silent huff of laughter. John didn't know what was so fucking funny. He refused to ask.

“Come, John. You know me better than that. I'd sleep on a bed of nails if it meant I got to suck your cock first.”

What a mistake this had been. John looked across the room to the table, where the papers were. He looked to his bedside table, where a

half-finished cigar and lighter sat. He grabbed both and stood.

The robe was womanish, there was no other word for it. Never mind the kind of woman who'd fit it would have to be an amazonian freak of nature. It was the way he belted it, John decided: something about the loose gaping sides just barely covering his nipples, the way his bare knee and calf slid forward from the silk, long and ready for action like a dancer's in a chorus line. John didn't understand why he couldn't just be naked like a normal man. John was naked, and he felt less naked than Terry looked in that fucking robe. Maybe he'd stashed it beneath the kitchen sink, John rarely checked there.

Terry finally looked away from the window in order to track his progress across the room. He watched John pick up the contract and flick his lighter. They both watched the paper catch and curl.

“That was to protect you, you know,” said Terry, feigning regret. “Make sure you got all you deserved, if you won the bet.”

John lit his cigar and gave it a solid puff. “I told you, no lawyers.” He gestured with the cigar and smiled humorlessly. “I trust you.”

His smile deepened. “Oh John. You really shouldn't.”

He returned his attention to the window and shifted his shoulder along the wall. The robe drifted; thigh. John could see the faint bruising his hands had left the night before. How could he have let himself be so weak, how hard would it have been not to—

“There's a man down below, looks like he's waiting by the front door of the dojo – is this him? Your fighter?” He paused and said, reflective, “He's kind of a pretty thing. You never said.”

John went stiff. He left the smoking half-burned paper on the table and crossed to the window to join Terry in looking down at the street.

John Lawrence was indeed standing outside the dojo, one foot kicked up behind him and arms folded as he leaned against the building. He was wearing sunglasses despite the low angle of the sun and he was frowning.

“That is him, isn't it?” murmured Terry, and John realized too late he had been baited; the long-fingered hands were already playing along his sides. Silk brushed his legs as Terry leaned close. Lips went to his ear and continued softly: “Is he very obedient, John? Does he do everything you ask of him, like I always did? Is it enough?”

“You should leave,” said John harshly. “You should never have come here.”

A flickering press of those fingers was the only sign Terry gave he minded. Everything else about his body remained the same: a sinuous presentation, well-crafted but transparently motivated. He wanted John to want him so badly. He never learned. Deep down he was still the same twenty-five year-old fool who came home wearing sheer stockings and a garter beneath his trousers, hoping John was fairy enough to think him pretty, and shameless enough to admit it.

Terry said, “You realize, since you didn't sign the contract, there will be nothing to stop me from taking absolutely everything from you when he loses. And I will do it, John. This apartment, the dojo. I'll even take your car. If I'm feeling particularly sore, I might report you to the IRS for back taxes owed.”

“He won't lose,” said John.

Terry pushed off the wall in order to crowd him, and the belt of the robe gave up and slithered free of its lazy loose tie. There was nothing between them now, and that was premeditated too. John looked down at Terry's strong body.

“But if he does," came the whisper, "I'm going to make you so ecstatically happy about it, you'll be sick. You wouldn't sign the papers, so take this as a binding verbal agreement: I'm going to fuck you, John.” His hand slid across John's stomach and down, warmly cupping his hardening cock. “That gorgeous ass you have kept from me these past twenty-odd years? I'll clear my schedule for the next six months. And what meetings I can't cancel I'll take over the phone while fucking you, because once I start, I don't suspect I'll want to stop. You're going to have to move into that soft bed you disdain so much, because if you think I'm making the commute from the east valley, you're very much mistaken. No. You'll have to become domesticated. My little house pet.”

A weaker man would collapse against the window and let Terry stroke him to completion. John gritted his teeth and endured. He could endure because he knew none of what Terry was describing would come to pass; Terry didn't even want it to, not really. His little ploy last night with the contract was proof of that. This was just another one of his little games, one of his ways of communicating that John hadn't been fucking him good or hard enough lately. He was so needy, so endlessly needy.

Below on the street, John Lawrence switched his weight to his other foot and refolded his arms. It must be almost seven.

John finally turned into the other man and took possession of his arms. A neat little struggle ensued. It didn't last long, not after John got a hand in that soft, long hair. Terry had only grown it out because he liked giving John something to tug on.

“On your knees, Lieutenant,” he said.

The robe spread out on the floor around them like an oil spill.

Chapter 61: ...

It is quarter past the hour and Johnny is starting to wonder if he's forgotten something – had Sensei said anything about canceling Monday's session? That would make everything easier today, but it bothers him he doesn't remember it. He is torn between giving it another fifteen minutes and giving up and leaving, because what he needs to do next is time-sensitive. But after what happened last week, he doesn't want to be another no-show with no explanation.

He spends five more minutes debating with himself and is almost taken off guard when the door to his right audibly unlocks and pushes open.

“It's late,” says Sensei tersely. “Get in here, let's get started.”

Johnny blinks and pushes off the wall of the building to follow him inside. He stops before reaching the mat; he doesn't take off his shoes because he isn't staying. He is about to make his excuses when he notices they are not alone in the dojo.

The man standing in the corner is tall, very tall. He's wearing a dark, well-tailored suit, which should look out of place in the dojo – except he looks perfectly at home. He's leaning an elbow against the mirrored wall and sipping from a mug. He and his reflection both smile over at Johnny.

Johnny decides the man doesn't matter. He returns his attention to Sensei and says, “I can't train today. I'll have to make up the hours later this week.”

Sensei opens his mouth and closes it just as quickly. His lips thin and his eyes cut to their corners, like he wants to look back at the man in the corner. Johnny had expected several responses, and he gets none of them. No *you are trying my patience, Mr. Lawrence*, no *I thought you were serious about training for this tournament.* He expected to have to convince Sensei of his commitment; part of him had been looking forward to it.

Johnny looks again at the man in the corner, confused.

Sensei steps in front of him, blocking the view of the rest of the room. He inclines his head, putting it dizzyingly close and he orders, “Take off your glasses.”

He sets his jaw and raises his head to look forward, and he reaches to slip the sunglasses from his face. He doesn't look to see Sensei's reaction as he takes in the renewed bruising around his eyes. Sensei has never liked seeing him bruised. Johnny is supposed to be untouchable and perfect. Any bruise was an indication of some failure on one or both of their parts.

He holds himself perfectly still. Still enough to grab – Sensei takes hold of his face, palm bracing his jaw, thumb against his cheek. He tilts Johnny for inspection. Over his shoulder Johnny sees the man in the corner set his mug down and approach them.

“You've been in another fight,” says Sensei flatly. “Is this why you can't train today? You've worn yourself out taking on too many?”

His cheeks warm against the shelter of his hand. He doesn't let himself blink. “I feel fine. I'm fit to train. But I have some things to take care of today that can't wait.”

That thumb digs in and turns his head again in an unspoken command, and Johnny finally meets Sensei's eyes.

His hand feels different on Johnny's face than Daniel's did. It's a strange thought: of course it does, why wouldn't it?

“Some *things*?” says Sensei, unsatisfied.

“I see you weren't kidding, John,” says the man, appearing behind Kreese. Even in an easy slouch, he looms. But if Sensei minds exposing his back to this potential threat, he doesn't let on. “Looks like you got yourself quite the brawler here.”

Johnny doesn't look away from Sensei. He says quietly, “Just some financial stuff. My condo, it really can't wait.” He searches his eyes, not breathing. He is very aware of the gaze of the man watching them, watching Sensei touch him. He adds, dry-mouthed with daring: “Robert came by the house yesterday, you see. He's insisting. You know how he gets.”

Sensei's eyes narrow a little like he suspects Johnny of talking back, but Johnny isn't talking back, he's just talking.

His hand smells of his cigar. It's making Johnny's nose itch.

There is something in this room. He doesn't understand it and is not sure he wants to, but other instincts tell him there's nothing to

understand. He doesn't have to understand to obey. Maybe he'll find answers on his knees.

Johnny starts to blink quickly, his eyes going between Kreese and the observer. He thinks very clearly: I should step back now.

He doesn't step back but after another second, Sensei drops his hand, finally relinquishing him.

“Be here early tomorrow,” he says to Johnny and, to the man watching: “Get the fuck out of my dojo.”

The man's chin arcs in the air as he tosses his head back and laughs silently through a widening smile. He has long hair, Johnny finally notices. Long hair and an earring, and a gold necklace, and rings on the fingers he raises to sketch a salute in the air at Sensei's back.

“Always a pleasure, Captain,” he says easily.

But then he turns and finds Johnny again, and his eyes go cold and wide like a blown-off hatch of a spiraling aircraft, all shrieking alarms, rushing air sucking and whistling past out into endless blue, unbreathable like the vacuum of space but with the lie of all that light and hue and *home* but home not as a place of safety, home as the place you were born and the place you will necessarily die, home as the place you can never return to and never leave; you will journey endless miles and live endless years and you will still always be here, falling through that same blue.

The man steps past him and leaves the dojo. Johnny blinks.

“Who was that?” he asks. His voice sounds strange in the room, slightly hollow against the hard bare walls and mirrors. He's never noticed that before. Sensei doesn't sound like that in here, he's pretty sure.

Kreese bends and picks up the mug the man had set on the floor by the mirror. His hand is clenched tight around the mouth of it. He looks up at Johnny, but neither he nor his reflection seem to really see him.

“Nobody you need to worry about,” he says.

Chapter 62: From Reseda, With Love - Prologue

He takes the turn into the Hill Terrace Condominiums at speed, the much-despised bump across the entryway giving him soaring feet of elevation for a perfect weightless second.

(McQueen. The Great Escape. Could Johnny have made the border fence jump at the end? Or would he have ended up tangled in barbed wire and surrounded by the enemy too. He always thought he could've handled the cooler. He wouldn't like it, but he could do it. Just give him a ball and the idea of freedom beyond the fence. He's made it longer with less.)

The parking lot is in the process of its usual morning drain, and he has to dodge around a couple reversing cars, the engine of his bike providing a reassuring buffer of white noise against the couple of angry shouts delivered by irate commuting neighbors.

He glides into his parking spot and puts his foot down. Cuts the engine. Takes off his helmet and swings his leg over the bike.

The guy from 3C who used to regularly cut him off if they arrived home at the same time is just getting into his car; he gives Johnny an indifferent once-over. The lack of recognition in his eyes is reassuring.

Johnny grips his key tight enough for the jagged edges to hurt his palm and heads up to his condo.

“Mr Lawrence? Mr Lawrence!”

Fuck. He doesn't have time for this. He quickens his step and gets to his door, inserts his key and – jiggles it. Damn it. He always forgets which way to turn, how has he still not learned which way to turn a damn key? They all work the same way, don't they?

Right behind him now: “Mr Lawrence, if I could have a word—”

He breathes out. He fixes a bland smile on his face and turns around to face Margaret of the Condo Association. She doesn't smile back, not really. She gazes up at him like she's looking at a piece of inconvenient road construction that has been sitting unfinished for 18 months.

“Mr Lawrence, I just wanted to let you know we have received a number of complaints – the next time you go on a trip, if you could perhaps ask someone to collect your mail for you, instead of letting it build up outside your door? It lends a palpable sense of *vacancy*, you see.”

He lets his eyes flicker up over her shoulder; was it that asshole in 2B, did he seriously give a shit about the state of John's mail. Or is this some weird hangup of Margaret's, a way to keep them all in line by making them think their neighbors are *that* uptight. He'll never know. Until recently, it never would have occurred to him to even wonder.

Margaret is still looking at him, waiting for a response. She keeps tilting her head a little, too, like she's trying to peek in edgewise past his sunglasses. He subtly turns his head to prevent this, presenting a solid front of polarized lens.

He wonders if there is a condo association rule about allowing oneself to be visibly bruised on the premises.

No, that's ridiculous. People get into car accidents all the time. You can't outlaw being injured. Or, at least, they haven't yet. (Give the insurance companies ten years, says Daniel in his head.)

Margaret is still looking at him. More like a stare now.

“You know,” she says, ominous, “like abandonment?”

He remembers to smile again. It feels strange, like his lips weren't meant to stretch this way. He doesn't give up, though.

“I understand,” he says and he reaches behind him for the door. Since he's doing it blind and backwards, he gets the key turned right this time. Score.

“You do?” she checks. She watches him open the door, and suspicion overrides her expression. Her voice rises. “Mr Lawrence, do I need to remind you, we have a strict anti-drug policy in this HOA—”

He gets the door shut, and his shoulders come down in relief once in the relative darkness of his entryway. He closes one eye and puts his face close to the door to look out the bright peephole, watching as a fish-eyed Margaret of the Condo Association fumbles around in her purse before pulling out some kind of strange flat electronic device.

What the fuck kind of spy shit...? The Association has really taken

things to a new level. Thank god he's not living here anymore.

Johnny narrows his eye, trying to get a better look through the peephole. She taps at the device's screen with a weird stubby pen, pinching her lips in a frown that tells the origin story of her various wrinkles. Finally she tucks the device away and leaves.

Shaking the unsettling hunted feeling off, he turns from the door. His steps sound hollow and insubstantial against the hardwood as he walks through the short entryway and into the kitchen.

It looks the same as when he'd last been here. Empty. Strange to think he hasn't been away for long enough for even a thin layer of dust to grow over the counter and other surfaces. Two weeks might as well be two decades in his head when it comes to this place.

His hands reach automatically for the cupboard to the right of the sink. He takes out a tall glass and fills it with water. Hesitates, eying the rusty color. Dumps the contents of the glass. Lets the water run for thirty more seconds before trying again. He drinks it down and sets the glass in the sink. He turns and looks out across the kitchen island, where Daniel had stood and called the two of them inevitable, into the large living room missing a television.

Man, check out all this space, said Tommy five years previous. *Sure beats your room at our old place.*

I guess, Johnny had probably said, definitely lying.

Think of all the house parties you'll have here. Poker nights around the kitchen table – you need to get a kitchen table. Also a good couch, then you can host game days on Sunday. We'll finally have a reason to learn how to make proper Bloody Marys. Think of the dates you can finally bring home, no more walks of shame through the common area, right?

But there had been no parties. No poker nights. John had bought a good couch but it was almost too big for what he ended up using it for, which was mostly passing out alone in front of the TV.

He shrugs out his shoulders restlessly and rounds the counter. He doesn't have time for reminiscing. He needs to move quickly – he's got a narrow window to work with. It might already be too late as it is.

Chapter 63: From Reseda, With Love - I

The process is easy. He finds he is almost glad for it, because he can use this. Just like the apartment's lack of dust, his body has not had enough time to go native to the new reality. Reverting is like throwing a punch; he reaches for it without hesitating.

If you're going to do anything out in the world, you need to be a person. So he builds a man. It is 7:45 AM.

He stands in the middle of the bathroom as the shower warms up and strips off his clothes: the plain jeans that pool slightly over the tops of his feet and the shirt he stole from Daniel's drawer, a pale blue tank that he thinks must've been pretty old because it is even smaller than the others. His skin prickles over when he takes it off, chest already missing the reassuring constriction of the cotton around his ribs.

Steam rises from the shower, unfurling and creeping along the ceiling and walls like something meant to blind men in another time, another place. He begins to sweat a little: one more thing to scour away under the hot water, right along with the feeling of Daniel's hands on his face and back and thighs, the tickling of his breath as he murmured nonsense praise into his neck. The man Johnny needs to be today does not know these sensations.

In the shower he scrubs his body down with an exfoliating soap bar from Faulkner's that smells of cedarwood and oakmoss and came in an understated ivory box embossed simply with *the classic* and *$10*. The bruises on his body accept the press of his hands and give back a faint, reassuring ache. A reminder why he is doing this.

The shampoo John uses is a low-suds product from Dundy & Lee, sold exclusively at Habraken's in The Grove; it comes in an 8 oz black bottle and cost $15 and although the directions say to use only a nickel's worth, he never feels he gets full coverage unless he applies about three times that. He rinses well to make up for this failure of discipline. The matching Dundy & Lee conditioner ($14) is easier; his fingers glide back through his hair, frictionless and ghostly.

The hiss of the spray leads seamlessly into the rattle of the shower curtain. He steps back out with skin pink and heated, made anew and smelling like someone else. It is 7:53 AM.

He doesn't reach for one of the thick towels hanging along the wall

but turns to the sink straightaway. John's shaving cream is from Pas Ce Richard, which is French, but it's okay because it's for shaving, which is manly. It's made from cade wood oil and shea butter and lathers into a rich foam that is soothing on his face after the shower. It comes in a 4.5 oz silver tube that cost $9, and John is almost out.

The tool in his hand: a solid Gillette Sensor, laser-welded twin blades mounted on responsive springs, *Gillette! the best a man can get.* The ad campaign cost upwards of $175 million, promising men the world over they could get *Closer, Smoother; Safer.*

The hand moving over the face is steady and sure, dragging a clean line through the lather to reveal a firm jaw. There hadn't been much stubble but still the face is remade: re-contextualized second-by-second by the work until it becomes a more perfect mask. A face made of angles palms and lips would glance off, would never even reach for.

He bends over the sink to cup water in his hands and splash it over the face, rinsing off the last remnants of cream. When he straightens, the cool water joins dripping hair to dot a bare chest and shoulders. His eyes meet the reflection's and give nothing back.

He reaches finally for one of the towels and makes quick work of drying what's left to dry. He applies aftershave: Pas Ce Richard again, which is still French, but it's okay because it doesn't have a strong scent.

He quits the bathroom and walks into the bedroom, crossing from tile to hardwood to carpet on silent, purposeful feet to stand before the closet. He'd left it open the last time he was here. The shirts and suits hang in a muted array, an offer of camouflage if one knows to look at it right, and he's trying. It is 8:02 AM.

He thinks about the kind of suit Robert or his father would wear; the charcoal Unamuno was perhaps the closest he had, but he hasn't worn it in over a year because the jacket had started to hang too loose around his torso. The Chamayou was too heavy for summer. He'll have to settle for the navy Debord. At least it should be alright to move in.

A pale blue cotton shirt with a standard point collar, dark grey tie with an understated dotted foulard pattern. He's not looking to be looked at.

He pulls the first layer on: the boxer briefs he wore here, a pair of navy crew socks in a mercerized cotton blend, a plain white undershirt. Next, the suit trousers: linen-silk blend slipping soft and

supple up his legs. He threads one of his cognac-brown belts through the loops. He slides into the shirt and does up the buttons. Tucks the ends into the trousers and finishes belting.

He sits on the edge of the bed to fix his feet into the right shoes: a pair of cognac-brown scotch-grain derbys. He should be able to move in these well enough.

He returns to the bathroom with the tie in hand, because even after all these years he still prefers to do this in front of a mirror. He flips his collar and drapes the tie around his neck, tips his chin up.

Do I really have to wear a tie? he used to ask his mom, before he grew old enough to understand there was safety in how she dressed him for the outside world. And her hands would come over his shoulders to guide the movement of his own, movements he now falls into without thinking. He watches the bend and tug of his fingers manipulating the necktie in the mirror and he sees her fingers: slim and tipped in pink, attentive and careful.

You look so handsome, she told him every time.

He finishes tightening the knot and folds his collar cleanly back into place. He's close now. It is 8:10 AM.

He pats his hair one last time with a towel and reaches for his workweek styling cream: J. Spader Sleek Finish Texture, $9 at Habraken's but he actually got it through work after Aalders & Bray won the account. *Look like how they want to feel.* John never did figure out what that meant.

He combs his hair back from his forehead, the sandy length gleaming and locking down like armor. Between the suit and his hair and the expression he will wear, it should be enough to override the startling bruising around his eyes. People get into accidents all the time. Even John Lawrence.

He clicks off the light in the bathroom. It is 8:12 AM.

He gives his arms to the embrace of the suit jacket, pulling his wrists forward so the shirt cuffs peek through. He pauses, considering the empty space in the cuffs where his cufflinks are supposed to go. He fingers the space. He lifts his arms and bends his elbows, testing the movement of the fabric, the gape and give of the cuffs. He'll have to remember to take the cufflinks off when the time came.

He is about to leave the room but at the last second remembers to cross to his chest of drawers. In the top one, beneath socks and handkerchiefs and random detritus, he finds the old collection of business cards. He shuffles through them like someone looking to cheat at poker and when he finds the right one, he slips it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

It's 8:15 AM. He thinks he can make it there before 9.

The desk sergeant in the police station doesn't so much as blink at John's mismatched black eyes; he glances up and down, taking in the suit and following the line of John's arm to the gleaming silver cufflinks sitting atop the desk, and from there to Robert's business card, neatly presented between his index and middle finger.

“I'm from Boal Brown and Schechner,” says John. “I believe you brought in some clients of mine yesterday evening.”

Chapter 64: From Reseda, With Love - II

The sergeant takes the card. He looks at it for a few seconds and looks up at Johnny again. His eyes are a grayish blue. A nonplussed grayish blue.

“You got an ID to go with this?” he asks.

The small station is surprisingly busy for a Monday morning, and John has to pretend like he doesn't notice the milling crowd or the people who have came up behind him to start forming a line. He makes a show of reaching for his wallet; pocket one, nope, but he's not worried; pocket two, hm that's strange; back pockets from sheer hope, damn.

“Damn,” he says. He is sure to sound annoyed rather than worried, almost like it's the sergeant's fault. “I seem to have left my wallet in the office.”

He braces his wrists against the counter and stares expectantly at the sergeant, who stares back. Seconds pass. The sergeant blinks. John does not. The sergeant's brow furrows. John's does not. The sergeant's head goes back a little. John doesn't move.

“Okay, uh,” says the sergeant finally, twisting to grab a fat folder. “What are your clients' names?”

John sighs. “Oh christ, Gerry – my new assistant,” he explains. “Useless. He was supposed to get me the names when they kicked this case my way. Trying to get my pro bono quota in,” he adds, and internally winces because that might be more information than is required; you should never try to lay it on too thick. He sighs again and checks his watch. “Look, they can't be that hard to find – there were booked as a group. Whole gang of guys, home invasion in Canoga Park yesterday afternoon. I'm told they were dressed up in black with masks, you know, like something out of those Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movies.”

The sergeant pauses, looking at him again uncertainly. Maybe he didn't see those films. Not Johnny's problem he doesn't have good taste.

He widens his eyes like he's losing patience, and the sergeant returns to his file.

“Doesn't look like we're currently holding anyone that fits that description,” he says, and before John can react to this he twitches a hand through the air as if forestall any argument. “Hang on, let me just—” and he turns and crosses a couple feet to the computer sitting in the corner. He starts tapping with his two index fingers, head ducking and craning like he's trying to peer into a microscope. He mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like *this fucking thing*, and the computer screen flickers and loads, lines of white text scrolling down to fill the display.

John does not fidget. He puts one hand in the pocket of his trousers and stands against the counter as if bored, while the concealed hand claws at his thigh.

“I don't know what your office told you,” says the sergeant, “but they're already being processed for release – posted bailed just a bit ago.” He blinks over his shoulder at John curiously. “That's quick. I thought you said this was pro bono?”

John casts his eyes to the ceiling, long-suffering. “Fucking Gerry.”

After, John sits straddling his bike across from the small police station: waiting.

The morning is already starting to heat up. He has folded his jacket away in the helmet compartment on the back of the bike and rolled his shirt sleeves as far as he can get them. The cufflinks are safely stowed as well; he won't be needing them again.

After twenty long minutes, during which he is hassled by a meter maid into circling the block to avoid a ticket, he straightens up over his handlebars, coming to attention as the doors of the station open and a ragged pack of men in all black appear.

There are only eight, which is fewer than the number arrested, he is pretty sure. They come down the steps of the station and, after exchanging some words, begin to break apart.

Johnny curses. He hadn't thought this far ahead. Who to follow? Three get into a waiting van; two cross the street and slump down on the bench beside the bus stop; two start walking west on Schoenborn – one is left standing alone on the sidewalk.

The man pulls at the neck of his dark pullover, making a face. He glances, squinting, up at the sky. He looks middle-aged, or perhaps just tired and unhappy. He doesn't look after the others as they disappear one-by-one. After a few more minutes, a taxi eases up in front of the station, and he gets into it.

Johnny slaps the visor of his helmet down and follows the taxi.

The car heads east across the valley, nudging through traffic with such egregious passivity, you'd think the meter charged by the minute instead of the mile. A couple times, Johnny is forced to swing to the side of the street and idle there to avoid overtaking it.

As the miles creep by, he starts to wonder if the guy is headed to Van Nuys – perhaps all this really does come down to some locals' problem with Daniel? But the taxi eventually stops in Reseda, at a dingy low-rise apartment building on Burbank.

He slides behind a parked Buick halfway down the block and watches along the gleaming pane of the driver's side as the man gets out and rifles through his pockets for his fare.

Johnny cuts the engine and gets off the bike. After a moment's consideration, he slips off his shoes and socks, tucking them in close behind the front wheel. He'd been trained barefoot. He works better this way – and he is silent, stealing along the sidewalk behind the man.

The man hooks a left into the complex, crosses the cracked concrete of what could be called a courtyard if one is feeling generous, and mounts a set of stairs to the second floor walkway. He isn't very good at the game, or maybe he's just tired; he doesn't sense Johnny coming up behind him until he has already unlocked the door to his apartment.

His eyes widen in recognition immediately, and he attempts to bolt inside and shut the door, but Johnny is too quick for him.

He catches the edge of the door with his hand and shoves hard. The man stumbles backwards into the dark apartment.

“Hi,” says Johnny, easy. “Was thinking we could talk.”

The man trips and falls, scrambles back in a frantic crab-walk another two feet, and then trips again. It's pretty funny? His face is contorted, mouth pulling up at the edges, lips shaking. Eyes so wide the whites show all around the brown – scared, he is scared. Also kind of funny.

It feels like a miracle, that he can look at John and react like this. His terror is so clearly disabling, he has already given in without even putting up a fight, already placed all control of what comes next in John's hands.

“Look, man, please – it was nothing personal, okay.” The man's hands come up. He isn't trying to get back to his feet anymore. “I was just doing a job, I swear—”

Johnny steps forward across the threshold. A ragged *Home Sweet Home* mat is tacky with accumulated dirt beneath his bare feet. The room smells of mildew and cigarettes. What a miserable dump. What kind of life can happen in a place like this.

“Like I said, I just want to talk," says Johnny, and he carefully closes the door behind him, cutting the man's pleading face off from the light of the morning outside.

Chapter 65: What We Talk About When We Talk About You - I

Johnny's already gone when Daniel wakes up the next morning.

An unfamiliar dread settles on him as he sits up and swings his legs out of bed. It's a quarter to eight, and light is pouring through the window, the curtains hanging lank and defeated against the onslaught of the hot, breezeless morning.

He had taken a long time to fall asleep the previous night. Spent what felt like hours watching the peaceable rise and fall of Johnny's bare back beside him: wondering.

(Johnny had no such problem, of course. The man complains about the quality of Daniel's mattress but invariably passes out within minutes of his head hitting the pillow. Daniel is generally more pleased than disgruntled about it, and that's annoying too. He's such a sucker sometimes.)

He sighs and gets up.

Outside his room, he can hear strange sounds coming from the kitchen. He bypasses the bathroom and heads down the hallway; eyes Chozen doing a kata in his living room – he better put that sofa back where it belongs; pokes his head around the corner and takes in the sight of two strange workmen over by the sink.

“Didn't think you were serious about getting the window fixed today,” he tells Chozen. It's an olive branch, or would be if he was able to drag his tone even an inch closer toward appreciative. Oh well.

Chozen completes a sequence, eyes unmoving from the wall. He says, level, “You always doubt me, and I do not know why – I am very serious person. One of my top qualities.”

“You see Susan this morning at all?” he asks, shifting his weight uneasily. “How was she last night?”

“She lit one of her disgusting cigarettes right on the front step, even before the door closed behind her,” is all Chozen says.

Daniel grimaces, even as a guilty tendril of relief tugged at his mood. He hasn't worked out how he's going to break the news about Ali.

Perhaps he'll be struck by divine inspiration sometime today?

In the kitchen, the men begin hammering on something. Daniel winces again, thankful he got up when he did. He rubs the back of his stiff neck and watches Chozen for another few seconds. He doesn't seem to have a single bruise on him from the day before. Just some dappling of faded marks Johnny had given him the previous week along his forearms and the right side of his ribs.

“You know,” he says, pitching his voice a little, “wouldn't it be easier to do that out in the yard? So you didn't have to go shoving my sofa around?”

Chozen turns and sends his foot arcing high and long through the air over their heads. “Yard is a mess. Too distracting.”

This guy. “Yeah, and whose fault is that?”

Chozen drops his arms to his waist and faces him, incredulous and oh-so-burdened by Daniel's question. “The window, it is fixed! I fixed it!”

He should just let it go. This is not worth fighting over, not now and not with him. Daniel has so many other things to deal with today, it would be a waste of both his time and energy to get into this right now. Like, sure, Chozen never actually *apologized* for the thing with the window and the yard, but he did pay for the new window. That's almost as good, right?

“Technically,” he says, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the kitchen, “it's not fixed *yet*.”

Chozen stares at him stonily. After a moment he turns around and returns to his kata.

And, fine. Whatever. Look, Daniel's busy too. He has work and then an asshole to go talk to – a different asshole. His schedule is *full up*.

“Don't forget,” he says on his way back to the bathroom, “Yukie wanted you to call her sometime today.”

A rude noise at his back, and then: “You are *so* petty and bitter. Would be much better for personality if you just fight me again.”

Daniel slaps the air behind him. Chozen probably can't see him, so he supposes he's doing it for his own sake.

At work, he is on his back beneath the engine compartment of an S-10 Bajas trying to diagnose a leak when one of the younger guys asks about the fight.

Daniel narrows his eyes and twists his wrist to shine his maglite between some couplings. No, they look fine. Maybe a bearing on the....

“Lou said you knocked them down like dominoes, one after the other. Like ten of them?”

“More like – seven,” says Daniel irritably to the underside of the truck. “Tops.” He sticks the maglite in his mouth, lips pinching down around the metal, and uses both hands to feel around. C'mon, where the hell is it? Oil doesn't just end up in a pool beneath a vehicle outta no where.

“Lou said you could kick clear over your head. He said at one point, you threw someone twice your size over your shoulder. He said one guy, you knocked out with a single punch and he had to go to the *hospital*. He said—”

Daniel pushes the maglite out of his mouth so it rolls over his chin and thumps down on his chest and he can snap, “Jack, are you actually checking that transmission fluid right now, or are you just standing around reminiscing about everything Lou has ever said to you?”

Awkward silence from above.

“No one went to the fucking hospital,” he says tensely into the silence. “Now – get back to work.”

He is breathing a little fast, his stomach clenching and churning. He pins his tongue between two canines and takes a careful breath in and out. He blinks at the now-dark undercarriage of the truck.

He should've expected this. But it's fine. It'll pass. Maybe Daniel will bring some homemade muffins in or something, that'll do it. They will all remember who he is and everything will go back to how it was last week.

He reaches down and fumbles the Maglite back between his teeth, blinking rapidly at the small circle of light on the dirty metal.

Fifteen minutes later, Daniel is pretty sure he has found the leak, and he already has a headache from the conversation he is going to have with the truck's owner about it. Man is going to think he's trying to cheat him. Daniel almost rubs his face before remembering at the last second his hand is filthy.

“Hey, uh, Dan?” ventures Jack.

Maybe he can get Joe to do it. In this business, older you look, the less suspicious people get with you. Of course, this means people will stop doubting him in about oh, maybe fifty years.

“Yeah?” he says absently.

“Think you could take me?” asks Jack. And then he adds hurriedly, his line of thinking so obvious it's almost a hate crime, “In a fight! A fight, I mean.”

Daniel glares up at the engine.

Muffins. Muffins for *weeks*.

He still has dark lines beneath his nails and embedded in the cuticles of his fingers as he drives over to the Cobra Kai dojo after work. He taps the wheel while waiting in traffic, pretends he is calmer than he feels.

This isn't going to be a fight. He doesn't care how intense this Kreese guy is or how he runs his dojo; Daniel is outside all that. Separate. Kreese might be an asshole, but that doesn't have to mean anything to him. Daniel can be untouchable.

(He swears he remembers that guy trying to make him fight on the spot when Mr Miyagi and him went by after Halloween ten years ago, but this is different. For one, Mr Miyagi isn't going to be there. And two, why did he think that first thing was going to be comforting?)

The light turns green and the brake lights in front of him wink out. Daniel drives on.

He should think about the advantages he has in this situation. One, Daniel is an adult now. He is a few inches taller than he was the last time this asshole tried looming over him, and he can even get a five o'clock shadow if he waits for enough five o'clocks to go by – the important thing is that he is an adult, and he even looks like one. Though most people would guess closer to nineteen than a stone's throw from thirty.

He is really bad at pep talks. Thank god he's never going to have kids.

Another advantage: Kreese has no one standing there, silently reveling in the menace and threats of bodily harm. Johnny should be home by now, and even if he wasn't, he'd be on Daniel's side. Wouldn't he?

An image, oddly clear and one he didn't even know he still possessed: Johnny standing straight and tall and blank like an action figure at Kreese's shoulder. He'd barely even looked at Daniel. And Kreese had barely looked at Johnny, even when asking him a question – like anything he might ask his student was rhetorical anyway.

“He teaches *high school karate*,” Daniel says loudly.

His windshield makes no reply.

He parks on Lankershim and spends half a block doing up the buttons of his uniform shirt. Just because he's showing up looking like a grease monkey don't mean he has to be a sloppy one.

He pauses at the storefront before Cobra Kai to look at his faint reflection in the window. Rakes his hair back from his forehead and resettles his cap. Maybe he should've ditched the cap. But there's the possibility he has a line of oil over his forehead. He can't see in this reflection; he tips the brim and angles his head, squinting.

A taller man steps up behind him on the sidewalk, blocking the light a little and splitting his reflection. Daniel goes still.

“What are *you* doing here?” says Bobby.

Chapter 66: From Reseda, With Love - III

The man's name is Howard, and Howard says *please.* He says it again while cupping his bleeding nose, but if he'd really meant it, he would've already cooperated.

Johnny looks away from the poster of Pink Floyd's The Dark Side of the Moon hanging on the wall above the small dusty television set. “I don't know why you're acting like this.”

“Like *what*,” says Howard plaintively. He takes his hand away and blinks at the blood smearing over his fingers and palm. He sniffs and then winces like that hurt a lot.

“Like you're not in the game.”

“The game?”

“Whatever you want to call it,” says Johnny impatiently. He goes to stand over him again, and Howard flinches back into his armchair. “You and a whole assault team broke into a man's house yesterday, and now you're sitting here acting like some kind of civilian or something.”

Howard puts up his clean hand. “Look, I don't know what you think is going on here—”

“That's what I'm trying to figure out.” Duh.

“But I'm not part of any – any game or team, okay. Not really?”

He rolls his eyes and backhands Howard. The next thirty seconds contain nothing but harsh breathing with a whimper or two thrown in, and it all looks and sounds like some big act the man is putting on. He feels a little embarrassed just listening to it. Sensei had kicked middle schoolers out of the dojo for less.

Johnny plants his feet and hikes the suit trousers up his thighs a little so he can squat in front of the armchair. He tilts his head to capture Howard's gaze, which he then holds unblinking.

“Who hired you?” he asks clearly.

“I told you, I don't know. There was a, a what-do-you-call-it.”

“Bagman?”

“An intermediary.”

“And what was his name?”

“I don't think she shared it – look, Felix handled all the talking and that guy never asks questions once he's been paid. All he told us was that she sounded like Margaret fucking Thatcher.”

Johnny doesn't know who that is. He'll have to ask someone later. “And what was the stated goal of your mission?”

“*Mission,*” says Howard, face twisting almost with a helpless sort of incredulity. The man's not laughing but somehow Johnny still gets the feeling he is being laughed at, and he doesn't like that.

He thinks about the look on Daniel's face as he watched the men approach across the backyard the day before, and he reaches out and curls a hand around Howard's right ankle. He begins to untie his shoe with the other. They're plain black Reeboks, the kind of shoe a nurse or custodian or anyone who works all day on their feet might wear. Functional, but ugly.

Howard stops breathing. “What – what are you—”

“It's a pretty simple question,” says Johnny, and he drags the shoe off Howard's foot, grip going tight as the man frantically tries to tug his leg away. “Why did you guys attack us yesterday?” He takes hold of the man's big toe, and Howards starts in with the *no, no* and *please* again. Johnny barely hears any of it. “What do you want with Daniel LaRusso?”

Howard stares. His voice climbs high as he cries, “Who the *fuck* is Daniel LaRusso?”

Johnny shakes his head and snaps the toe backwards, hard and swift. Then he has to lunge up the man's body to clamp a hand over his mouth, because Howard is screaming.

The armchair almost tips over.

Ten minutes later, John steps out of the apartment. He closes the door

behind him and looks around before heading back down the way he came. He takes care not to walk too quickly, or act in any way that would attract more attention.

He sits on the curb next to his bike to put his socks and shoes back on, and he can't help the way his eyes drift up and around as he does it. All his life he has felt like he was being watched, but he never thought it was quite this literal.

He doesn't see anything out of the ordinary. He gets on his bike and pulls away; it takes him a couple miles to stop checking his side mirrors for anyone following.

Chapter 67: What We Talk About When We Talk About You - II

Daniel turns around and meets his eyes. “I guess, if I'm being generous, I'd say I'm here for the same reason you are – I want answers about what that was yesterday.”

Bobby's suit rumples slightly as he puts his hands in his pockets. He gives him a quick once over before glancing down the sidewalk, towards the dojo. “And you were just going to walk in there and talk to him, huh.”

“Is there any reason I shouldn't?” he asks, as if he hadn't spent the entire drive thinking of a dozen.

“I could name a dozen,” says Bobby. “Starting with the fact that I don't think you have any idea who that man is, or how he operates.”

Daniel spreads his arms. “So enlighten me. I'm not opposed to going in there together.”

Bobby raises his eyebrows, skeptical. “But why would I want to go in there with you? Your presence will probably just make everything more complicated.”

“You have a problem with me? Name it.” Daniel likes to think the best of people, or at least he tries very hard to be the kind of person who thinks the best of people – but he thinks he has a pretty good idea what Bobby's problem with him might be.

Bobby glances down the sidewalk again and then jerks his head in the opposite direction. “Look, let's not do this here – there's a diner a block up.”

And so, a nobody in an oil-stained uniform sits down opposite a man in a very nice suit in a windowed booth overlooking the afternoon Monday traffic. Both order coffee, and neither move to drink it when it arrives.

“You know, I wasn't really surprised you could fight yesterday,” says Bobby.

Daniel says nothing, just raises his eyebrows inquiringly.

“Tom doesn't remember high school all that well,” he says, “but I happen to have a very good memory. And what I remember of *you* is a guy who always flew off the handle, who went out of his way to wind Johnny up, and who on more than one occasion seemed to take a great deal of joy in hitting me whenever he had an opening.”

Daniel blinks, startled. “I don't know what you're talking about, but if I hit you, I was only ever hitting back – you want, we should talk about you? The smart one, right? The good guy in that pack of animals you called a friend group. You really want to talk about knowing a person based off what they did in high school, Bobby?”

“Don't call me that,” says Robert evenly. “We're not old friends, and that's not my name.” He seems to shake himself: abruptly shrugs and sits back in the booth. “Look, none of this is really relevant. I'm not here to reminisce, I got my fill of that at the reunion.” He tips his head and regards him shrewdly. “So what were you planning on saying to Kreese?”

He is slow in switching topics in his brain. He hadn't liked the surety in Robert's voice, that matter-of-fact tone describing a perspective seemingly long-cemented as reality. The lawyer fucking him on cross-examination; when did he ever hit Bobby?

“I was going to confront him about the attacks,” he says slowly, “and see if he had an explanation. What were *you* going to say to him?”

“I was going to ask him what the hell he's dragged John into.”

“You don't like him, do you,” says Daniel, realizing.

Robert pauses, deciding. He takes hold of the handle of his coffee mug and presses his knuckles against the hot ceramic.

“Look, we don't have to like each other to work together here,” says Daniel, stifling his impatience. “I think it's likely we share a goal. We both just want to make sure Johnny is safe. Right?”

“John Kreese is a bitter, lonely man who gets his kicks lording over impressionable boys who are too young to know better.”

Could've told you that ten years ago, Daniel doesn't say, because he's trying to be politic here. “And when did you finally figure that out?” he says instead, which okay, isn't a whole lot better. He's a little on edge, give him a break.

“Not soon enough,” Robert says. “But you watch enough court trials, you start to get a pretty good ear for manipulation. I wouldn't trust Kreese with a pet goldfish – he'd have it thinking it can breathe air after a week.”

For some reason, Daniel finds himself thinking about a broken glass door and a blood-streaked hand. “Is that what he did to Johnny?”

Robert narrows his eyes and just looks at him. Daniel could see how this guy and Johnny might have grown apart. He gives the impression of having ten thoughts for every one he verbalizes, and he's so preoccupied with managing them he doesn't seem to really look at you or see you at all.

“You know,” says Robert. “I just want John to be happy.”

“Happy?” says Daniel, light. “Is that what you think he's been?”

And the worst part of himself is almost begging the man to say yes, because then he'll have an excuse to cut all losses and give up on the conversation. Daniel doesn't know what Johnny acted like back when he was wearing a suit and tie and living out of that bleached-bone carcass of a condo, but he doesn't think anyone with a brain could have looked at that guy and called him happy. Not if they knew him, and Robert is supposed to know him better than Daniel, right?

“Of course not,” says Robert impatiently; Daniel resigns himself to continuing to talk to him. “But he just needs to keep trying. I mean, he was working all the time and drinking the rest of it, he wasn't out there trying to meet anybody, he wasn't building a life – could barely get the man to start contributing to his 401K, *that* was a nightmare.”

Daniel thinks about the Johnny sitting in his kitchen in his boxers after he first brought him home. The way his eyes looked like he was gazing up from the bottom of a deep well, his feet stuck in sucking mire. Call it a hunch, but he didn't think that guy could probably stand to think about retirement and what it might look like, let alone how far in the future it was.

“Well, it must be such a weight off your mind,” he says. “He did meet someone – me.” Cue mental jazz hands; da-da da-da da-da-*ta*!

“Right.” Robert gives him a polite but skeptical smile. Daniel waits for it. Here it comes. “Look, no offense—”

“Uh huh,” he says pleasantly.

“Understand I don't have a... moral problem with it, really.” Daniel doesn't interject again, just watches him steadily. The man's tone turns diplomatic. “But John needs something more long-term. Something stable, that will tie him to *people*. If he could find the right girl, settle down, maybe start a real family—”

He can't help it then: he laughs again. It's not a nice laugh, leaves something ugly churning his stomach up in its wake. Robert puts his head back a little and waits calmly.

“What like – kids,” Daniel say at last. “You think that guy should have *kids*?” He leans forward. “Do you want to know how I found him a few weeks ago? He was sitting on the street in front of some bar in the middle the night, completely shit-faced, having gone demolition derby against a company car with his bare hands. Anyone who has that kind of violence in him has no business procreating.”

Robert's expression fractures and reforms almost immediately into something tight and not a little suspicious. “He's got problems, yeah. And yet – you're seeing him. Apparently.”

Daniel is not about to get into a debate with this guy on the ethics of dating a hot mess. “You know what, I think this was a waste of time.” And he starts to slide out of the booth.

“If you really knew him, you'd understand I'm right.”

Daniel stops sliding and slaps his hands on the table top as leans forward. “You know, the thing is, you don't want him to be happy, you want him to be a completely different person.”

“How dare you,” says Robert, anger sliding along the top of his breath for a second before he puts it away again. His jaw presses tight and releases and he continues, “I've known Johnny since we were ten years old. You – what? You messed him around real bad for a few months ten years ago, and now you're back in his life for what I'm starting to guess has only been a couple weeks, and you think you can lecture me about who you think he is?”

Daniel makes himself smile. “You're a lawyer, right? I'm sure this goes against all your training, but actually, some things are not that complicated. I don't need to have been there for Johnny's awkward pimply phase to tell you – your friend is gay. There is no right girl for him.” He pauses, provoking. “I mean, maybe if she had a dick? But I don't know, man, he really likes them butch.”

If Susan was present, she would absolutely crack a joke here about Daniel's inadequacy on the butch front, but she's not, so he gets to tip his head to the side and continue to give Robert an earnest, superior look.

“That makes sense,” says Robert calmly, “given how hung up he always was on John Kreese.”

Daniel falters; Robert notices.

“Go ahead and tell me it's good for him,” he presses, and now he is the one leaning forward in the booth, eyes steady. “A gay man with a history of violence and no direction, no family, nothing and nobody to give his life structure or meaning – except his old teacher who he worshiped like a god, who knows exactly which buttons to push because he was the one who installed them.”

He thinks again about blood swirling away down a bathroom sink; about a crew-cut kid standing on the grass in the dark who knew he needed something besides his Sensei but had given up on looking for it; and oddly, about Ali, who'd warned Daniel long ago.

“Did Kreese know?” Daniel asks after a moment. He feels a little sick.

Robert's knuckles press against the mug again as his grip tightens on the handle. “I could never be totally sure.”

“You think he was the one who sent those guys yesterday?”

“It was definitely going to be one of my questions.”

Daniel leans to take out his wallet. He tosses a couple bills on the table. “Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go get some answers.”

Chapter 68: The Man with the Golden Fist - I

Johnny stops at a gas station a block off Ventura to use a payphone.

He has to buy something to break his ten for change, so he ends up getting something to drink – a forty, which he doesn't think he's ever had before. They put it in a brown paper hobo bag, which he bemusedly discards the moment he is back outside. It goes down easy, if a little stale, and pools sickly in his empty stomach. He maybe should have eaten something before leaving the house earlier.

He looks around the street once before slotting the coins into the bank and punching the number in. He puts the phone to his ear and turns his shoulder against the corner of stall, so he can keep an eye out for followers.

The phone rings and he checks the time. Almost noon. Feels later. Susan will be at work, and Daniel too if Johnny has his week's schedule right. He hopes he does; it would be pretty weird to get him on the phone and have to ask for someone else. Be pretty weird to get him on the phone at all – the sound of his warm, dark voice in Johnny's ear, absent the weight of his eyes, the feel of his presence? It would be hard to concentrate on what he needed to do.

Johnny is mid-swig on the forty when the ringing stops and an indifferent Chozen says, “Yes.”

He lowers the bottle hurriedly. “Chozen.”

The man's tone immediately relaxes. “Lucky Penny, why are you calling? You should come home, look at the new kitchen window I paid for – it is much nicer than the old one. Sill twice the depth at least. I think – perhaps can hold little plants. Even Daniel-san cannot bitch.”

“That sounds great,” says Johnny, who had kind of forgotten about the kitchen window. “I'm sure he'll be really happy with it. I think he mentioned wanting fresh herbs for the kitchen.”

Chozen makes a smug noise. “Perhaps we should fight and break the living room window next. I am thinking – bay window with cushions. Make room not so very dark and dingy.”

“Sounds great,” he says again rapidly, glancing around the street

again. A silver Plymouth Horizon has been idling on the edge of the station lot since he came out. Probably unrelated? Who tails a guy in a subcompact. “But, look, Chozen – I did some digging about those guys we fought yesterday. They're not after Daniel.”

Chozen grunts, skeptical.

“No, really, it's – it's me. They were coming after me.” It doesn't sound less bizarre aloud than it did in his head. He's almost breathless with exhilaration.

“And how did you get this information?” asks Chozen, still unconvinced.

“I uh. I followed one of the guys home and broke his toe.” And it turns out that *does* sound weirder aloud than it had in his head. He checks his surroundings. People probably wouldn't understand, if they overheard.

There is a pause on the line, long enough for Johnny to fumble with the bottle and tuck his head, creasing his neck to peer at the phone like he might see a physical problem with it. He puts it carefully back to his ear.

“Hello? Chozen?”

“I see,” he says, noncommittal. Johnny's brow pinches. Maybe he read the man wrong; they haven't known each other that long, after all. Then Chozen continues loudly, “Well, why are you calling me? Clearly you are on big mission, don't want to keep you—”

“No, no,” he rushes to interrupt the tirade of wounded pride, “Chozen, man, I need your help.”

“But why would you need *my* help? I am only glorified house contractor now. *Bay window*,” he adds under his breath, like he is disgusted with himself or maybe the whole world, or maybe those are the same thing in his head.

“Because I got another name to check out, but I have no idea if the guy will be alone or not,” he says, instead of telling Chozen that the bay window idea sounded really nice, actually, because like, Daniel could probably sit and read in it? But now is not the time for all that. “The closer I get to the source of all this, the less I know. Look, we fight really well together, don't we? I think we could take on whoever's out there. Get to the bottom of all this.”

The pause this time is much shorter, and Chozen sounds a little mollified as he says, “What do you need me to do?”

Johnny almost slumps against the stall in relief. He rattles off the address Howard had spilled. “Think you can meet me there in half an hour? Do – uh, actually. Do you have a car?” He realizes he has never seen anything else on the street outside Daniel's house.

“Do I have a car!” cries Chozen, disgusted again; the next second, Johnny finds himself listening to the dial tone.

He finishes off the last of the forty, stomach flexing and jumping as he forces it all down. When he lowers the bottle, two teenage girls are quickly looking away from him, faces caught in identical grimaces of distaste. Huh. He thought the clothes would make nothing else matter, even this.

He shrugs and tosses the bottle in the garbage and gets back on his bike.

The Plymouth Horizon is gone, he is relieved to notice.

Chapter 69: What We Talk About When We Talk About You – III

The Cobra Kai dojo tells a story.

The entryway's glittering array of trophies and framed pictures give a history of cold competence and domination: a challenge or a threat, Daniel thinks, depending on one's perspective. The main space, a white mat and white walls closing a person off from the outside world to focus only on the hit. The far wall: a large mirror letting nothing escape notice.

He and Robert are the only two people inside. The movement of their reflections draws his eye, and Daniel finds himself looking at the incongruent image of some guy in a dirty mechanic's uniform, standing out like a blemish in the white, pristine space.

He can't control how anyone sees him. All he can do is act a certain way and hope the right people notice and understand, until maybe someday it grows real enough to block out the truth underneath.

“You know, maybe you're right about me,” he says to Robert.

“About what?” he says, distracted. He'd been looking down at his feet on the mat, shoes positioned like he was going to step out of them. Daniel watches the mirror curiously as he shuffles in place, easing back from the motion.

“About – flying off the handle, I guess. The violence. My friend Chozen, yesterday – you'd never know it now, but I once broke his windpipe. Nearly killed him.”

Robert stares and Daniel looks around the dojo again, uncomfortable. He doesn't know why he's telling this guy about it, except Robert is nobody who matters in his life. But he matters to Johnny, so maybe he should know.

“Do you think that's why Johnny's drawn to me?” he asks. “Like, maybe he can see it.”

Robert just looks at him, wordless, until Kreese steps around the corner from the back room, and they both turn to face him.

“Mr Brown,” he says, approaching until he is a few feet away. He sets

his feet in place and hangs his hands on the front of his gi like they're one of the weapons on display on the wall. He smiles. “Long time.” His gaze switches to Daniel and narrows.

He can't help but look the man over in turn, remembering what Robert had said. He doesn't want any kind of connection to this man. He could go the rest of his life without thinking about him ever again and count himself happy.

Kreese eventually loses interest in Daniel and shifts his gaze to stick on Robert. “What a strange pair you make. Why are you here? As you can see, Mr Lawrence is not. I can't imagine what you have to say to me.”

“Can't you,” says Bobby tensely.

“Someone is targeting Johnny,” says Daniel loudly, a little nettled by the easy dismissal. “And the timing makes it pretty clear it has something to do with you and this bullshit tournament you're training him for, whatever you've dragged him into.”

Kreese pauses. He drops his hands in favor of folding his arms across his chest. He puts his head to the side and gives away nothing as he says, “What do you imagine I've dragged him into? He's my fighter, isn't he. Why would I want him hurt before a real fight?”

Daniel has no reply to make to that, because why indeed – but he watches Bobby's hands curl into fists.

“I don't know,” he says calmly, when Bobby doesn't speak and it's gotten a little awkward. “That's why we came here to talk to you. None of this makes any sense. I just know, you like making deals, don't you. Maybe you made another one.”

“Another one?” says Kreese sharply. He looks hard at him again and slowly, his mouth stretches into a smile, his whole expression cracking open like fissures in the earth. His laugh comes up from his chest like an eruption. He doesn't have a face suited to laughter; it means something different coming from him than it does regular people.

“Recognize me now?” guesses Daniel, aiming for dry and only managing tight.

Kreese's only response is to turn and pace a couple steps away. When he speaks, it's not to Daniel.

“Bobby, you know, I'm surprised at you. Last time this little fairy was hanging around, Johnny seemed to struggle with his commitment to the dojo – I guess now we all know why. But you, what are you doing? I thought you believed in being your brother's keeper.”

Daniel moves before he is fully aware of Bobby moving; he catches the other man by the upper arms mid-lunge.

“You were a bastard then, and you're a bastard now,” spits Bobby, and he's not quite fighting Daniel, but the muscles beneath Daniel's grip are tense. His whole body is straining forward with longing.

Kreese doesn't move at all, just stares into Bobby's eyes steadily, almost disappointed. “If you've let yourself or Johnny down in some way, you need to take responsibility for that on your own. I've only done what I've always done – provide guidance and a firm hand.”

Daniel looks at him over Bobby's shoulder. He feels a little sick even if he doesn't know quite why, but he pushes past the feeling to study the man's expression. Intuition meets urgency and he takes the plunge.

“Robert, let's go,” he says, pulling at his arms. “Can't you see? This guy's completely in the dark, he knows even less than we do.” Kreese's eyes shift to meet his own, and he adds simply, “he's useless.”

He looks away like he doesn't notice or care what Kreese's reaction is. He pulls Bobby again; this time he relaxes backwards. He shrugs out of Daniel's grip, but not like he hates it. He gives Kreese one last contemptuous look and turns silently to leave.

“Mr Lawrence knows who he is when he's here,” Kreese says to their backs. “Would you take that from him?”

Daniel puts up a wary hand in the air behind Bobby, in case he decides to turn around and lunge again. But Robert keeps walking, and he doesn't look back.

“Where's your car?” Daniel asks him back out on the sidewalk. Robert gestures and Daniel thinks about his own a moment before deciding. “Okay, we'll take yours.” He starts walking quickly.

“Take – mine, what?” Robert catches up with him in a moment, demanding, “Where do you think you're going? You heard him, he didn't know anything.”

They arrive at a black BMW 8 Series, and Daniel rounds it to wait at

the passenger side. Robert looks at him over the top of the car, not moving to unlock it.

Daniel glances back in the direction of the dojo and sighs. “Look, call it a hunch. Maybe it comes to nothing. Kreese didn't know anything, but he didn't exactly look surprised either.”

“Why would he be surprised?” says Robert. “He saw John for training earlier, right? He couldn't miss the bruising.”

“I think he's got some ideas, though. Ideas he wouldn't share with us.”

“So you want to, what, follow him?”

He flaps a hand, like: finally, you get it. Robert grits his teeth; a muscle in his jaw jumps.

Daniel waits, pretending at patience he does not actually possess.

“When he really wanted to punish one of us,” says Bobby abruptly, looking back at the dojo, “he always made sure we all took part in it. No one could have clean hands. And when it was Johnny, he'd – he made us fight him. One after the other, taking turns. Wouldn't call it done until John stopped getting back up." His throat moves in a swallow, and he shakes his head as if to clear it. "I don't know what the lesson was supposed to be – I couldn't see – I think. The only thing he really wanted us to understand was that it was all up to him, and him alone. His decision. John could keep getting up, but you know, it stopped being a choice eventually. There always came a point where he just – couldn't. Because we'd beat it out of him.” He looks down at the key in his hand and finally across to Daniel, expression tight. “What I've never been able to figure out is why we never said no. Why we went along with it. We were friends but – somehow that meant something different when we were in the dojo.”

Daniel doesn't know what to say. He thinks maybe there is nothing to say.

“Whatever was going on with you two back in school – whatever you did that distracted Johnny so bad. Maybe I hate you for it because you didn't finish the job.” Bobby clears his throat and looks away again. “Or maybe because you still managed more than I ever did, or even tried to do.”

Daniel finally speaks. “It wasn't intentional, you know. I didn't understand even half of what was going on with him back then.” Still

don't, he doesn't add, because that is not how you instill confidence in one's potential in-laws.

“Yeah,” is all Bobby says. He doesn't sound comforted. Well, fine. Daniel wouldn't be either, if it was him, if he'd been part of some brutal gang.

“But, hey – Robert.” He meets his eyes over the top of the car. “We're both trying now. Right? So let's follow this guy, see where it leads.”

Bobby doesn't respond except to turn his key in hand and depress a button; all around the car, the locks buzz clear. They each open their door and slide inside. They buckle up and look forward through windshield: down the street to the doors of the dojo.

“Your friend – Chozen. Was it an accident?” asks Bobby into the quiet of the car.

Daniel remembers exhaustion dragging at his limbs, the echo of countless hollow drums still pounding away in his ears or maybe that was just his pulse. The terrible clarity of his rage as he looked down into a pair of wholly unrepentant eyes. Chozen stared up like he knew exactly what to expect, and for a critical few seconds, until it was too late to change his mind and be someone else, Daniel chose to oblige him.

“No,” he says, and they don't talk again for some time.

Chapter 70: Susan on a Hot Tin Roof, Act I

The catering for the one o'clock post-lunch-lunch meeting falls through due to a mix-up in Susan's calendar and of course, *she* isn't going to take the blame for that, so she puts it on the catering company, but this backfires, just like everything always backfires, because it means she has to call the caterers and explain they are terminating all future services with them *with prejudice*, and Paul is still screaming at her from his office for everyone on the floor to hear anyway, and of course the person manning the phone at the caterer that day has to be the sweet young girl from Alabama or Georgia or one of those places where time moves so slow it must be like chewing gum still stuck to the sole of her voice and she sounds like she is going to start crying right there over the phone, and Susan really can't deal with that today? so she hangs up, knowing she is now going to be just one more disillusionment that kid has to accept after she came west to follow her dreams or whatever the hell she was hoping for when she got on that bus in Louisiana or wherever, and Susan is never going to think of this girl ever again, not even once. In fact, she has already forgotten her. There is only Susan – and Paul, who calls her a stupid cow. He tells her she is lucky he doesn't have time to find another assistant this week.

Her stomach does not feel connected to her body. It is a loose cannon floating around on a hair trigger, and she'd actually really counted on that post-lunch-lunch meeting's leftovers. She finds she is irrationally angry with the caterers.

She sits in on Paul's two o'clock with a pair of men from New Line Cinema, ostensibly to take notes and fetch drinks, but mostly because Paul likes having another body in the room when he's negotiating with more than one person; Paul is a big believer in balance. He does Tai Chi on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

“Let's talk the favored nations clause,” says Paul.

“Oh, don't even start,” says one of the men. “Your guy isn't worth that, and you know it.”

“He's going to be worth it in five years.” Paul smiles and leans back in his chair. “And won't you wish then you were on better terms with us. I have a long memory for fair dealers.”

Susan looks out the window of Paul's office, at the glass of the

neighboring building reflecting the flat depthless blue of the western sky. You wouldn't guess at the smog of the day, from that reflection.

After the meeting she escapes down the hallways to the elevator bank, which she takes to the third floor, where the canteen is – of course – closed. But vending machines are forever; so are the calories, she figures, but at this point she doesn't even care anymore. Who does she need to look nice for, anyway.

Back in the office, her phone is ringing and Paul is looking up from his desk at her through the glass wall. She lunges across the room to snatch the headset up from the cradle.

“Paul Morrison's office,” she says, hiding her breathlessness with practice if not ease.

“Susan,” says Chozen in her ear.

Her brow twitches a little in surprise, but that is the extent to which she allows herself to react. She casually walks around the wide desk and makes a neutral affirming noise.

Daniel knows better than to ever call her at work, but she has never had that conversation with Chozen. Why would she? Theirs is a pleasurably spontaneous friendship, wherein Chozen appears and disappears, lighting up the margins of her life like a distant firework or oil tanker explosion. He is something wild and wondrous, and he absolutely is not supposed to even exist on the phone during work hours. Even the sound of his voice against the backdrop of the office makes something in her head swim unpleasantly.

She sinks down in her chair and rolls it in close to the desk until it's pressing against her stomach, grounding. In her ear Chozen says something about how she knows people, or her boss does? and can she look up a name, the man is very, very rich.

Probably, says Johnny in the background.

“Probably very, very rich,” affirms Chozen.

“Uh,” she says, and she quickly glances up to check the glass divider; Paul is back to reading through contracts. She lowers her voice and says, “Look, I've had this conversation a million times with Daniel, and I have to say, I'm a little surprised I have to have it with you. But that's not how it works, okay? Just because someone's rich doesn't mean they know every other rich person on the planet. And actually,

it's a *little* offensive you think that. I mean, we're just people."

"Susan," Chozen says simply, "do not make me call Chin."

She sighs silently; checks on Paul again. After a second of half-hearted internal debate, she scoots over and drags open her bottom right drawer. She extracts the fat master rolodex and thumps it down atop the desk.

"What's the name again?" she says. "And what is this about anyway? Why are you with Johnny?"

"We are investigating the group of assailants we fought yesterday."

She checks her nod, because – wait, yesterday? She pauses, fingers tucked between the Rs and Ss to not lose her spot. "You guys got into a fight yesterday?" she asks blankly.

A pause, and then Chozen says, a little reprovingly, "*Susan.*"

"What? Don't give me that, I kind of had a lot on my mind."

"Lucky Penny is covered in bruises!"

She switches ears, hand gripping the phone impatiently; the office melting away. "That guy's always covered in bruises, what am I supposed to think? Sorry I'm not going to rush to coo over his boo-boos every single time. I mean, for all I know, with the way he is, maybe he *asked* Daniel to give him some of them, I don't know! *I* don't judge!"

And her instincts about vigilance in the office prove catastrophically but uselessly needed in the next second, as two atrocities happen to her at the same time:

1) Paul picks up the phone

and

2) Susan glances up from the rolodex to find Ali standing in the doorway

Susan stares at her and Ali stares back and in her ear and in the next room over, Paul is saying with gaining speed and vitriol, *Susan, are you taking personal calls at the office now?* And Chozen says, *who is this? You are very rude. Put Susan back on.* And meanwhile Ali stares at Susan and she stares back.

“Who is *this?*” repeats Paul, incredulous. “The man who owns this fucking telephone number and the telephone, and the actually the whole fucking office. Who are *you* – wait. Wait, I know this voice. Yamoto? Is that you?”

“Yes, you are correct,” Chozen says immediately, “it is I,” because when he is annoyed there is nothing he won't say or do in response, it's something she and him have always had in common but this time Susan has to stop him, *she has to stop this,* but Ali is standing in her doorway and it has not even been twenty-four hours since she wouldn't quite meet Susan's eyes as she got up from the table and said she needed to think.

Apparently, she has thought? And for some reason come here, to the worst place on earth.

“You sneaky, duplicitous cocksucker,” starts Paul, and he says a lot more; meanwhile, Susan swallows a suddenly dry throat and tucks the mouthpiece against her shoulder to quietly ask Ali what she is doing here.

“Isn't it obvious?” says Ali, taking a careful step further into the room. “I wanted to talk. Figured you'd dodge me if I waited until after work.”

Susan thinks about it and nods and shrugs a little, because: yeah, she totally would.

“—trying to poach my staff now, is that it? Is there no underhanded scheme you people won't resort to?” demands Paul in the other room. “Well, it won't get you very far. Remember what we did to Hue City, asshole.”

Ali's eyes shift over to look at him through the divider. Her expression is startlingly clear-eyed with surprise and growing dislike. She never takes long to make her mind up about people; it would be an obnoxious quality if she wasn't usually right.

“Ah, America lost that war, yes?” asks Chozen, his tinny, satisfied voice bleeding through against Susan's blouse. It tickles a little.

Abruptly, clarity descends. Susan understands: so this is it. The End.

She neatly puts the phone back to her ear and says quietly, “Chozen, I'll meet at you home.” And she doesn't wait for him to confirm, she simply replaces the phone back in its cradle. A second later, she hears

the phone in the other room slam down as an echo of the move and almost flinches.

“What the hell's going on?” Ali asks her, and what a good question.

“*Susan*,” Paul bellows.

She blinks and watches through the glass as he shoves away from his desk. She feels nothing about it; she is pretty sure she should feel something about it. She busies herself with picking up the master rolodex and putting it in her Fendi handbag. It makes it bulge in an unsightly fashion. Oh well: temporary state of affairs.

Paul appears in the opening between their offices, red-faced. He starts slightly as he notices Ali, and his chin comes up; his mouth wavers and shuts before it reaches for a polite smile.

“Oh – I'm sorry,” he tells her thinly, “do we have an appointment?”

It's pretty funny; that's usually Susan's line.

Ali opens her mouth but doesn't find anything to say; Susan takes the burden of attention off her by standing up behind the desk and lifting her handbag.

Paul's gaze swings over. “What do you think you're doing?” he demands. “We have a four o'clock to prepare for.”

“Not me,” she says, careless. “I quit.”

“Quit?” His eyes follow her like a prison spotlight as she walks across the room towards Ali and the door. “Oh no, that's not how this works. You don't quit.”

“Sounds like she just did,” Ali says; her tone is perfectly bland, but she also very obviously positions herself in Paul's way as Susan walks out of the room.

They walk together towards the elevators. Susan's hand is sweating as she grips the handles of her bag tightly. She can't quite feel her feet, but Ali's elbow presses against her own every other step, so at least she knows she is somehow still upright.

Paul follows them across the main office floor, saying loudly for every single person to hear – to not have the choice in hearing – how she is a lousy worker and he'll make sure everyone knows it; how she'll

never work for another agency in the city; how she'll be manning a makeup counter at the mall when he's through with her, and it's this last that finally trickles through to her brain as the elevator arrives and the doors open and she and Ali step inside.

It's just – a makeup counter in the mall? Really? That's the best he's got?

“Paul, get real,” she says finally, leaning forward to hit the button for the parking level. “I'm *rich*.”

The elevator doors close his reaction off from view, but she catches Ali's reflection biting back a grin.

Chapter 71: The Man with the Golden Fist – II

Over the course of the next hour, Johnny goes from straddling his bike impatiently; to folding forward and resting his head on his arms over the handlebars, leg jiggling; to getting off the bike and pacing; to finally slumping against the side of the laundromat he'd parked beside. By the time it ticks past 1 PM, he has slid down to sit on the ground while thumping his head back against the bricks.

Finally, a cherry red Miata eels across three lanes of traffic, heralded by an explosion of horns in its wake. It slides along the curb behind Johnny's bike, improbably fitting itself into the tight space with nary an adjustment needed. Chozen cuts the engine and lifts himself over the wheel to look at Johnny getting up from the ground.

“What the hell, man,” he says. “What took so long? I was about to go in without you.”

Chozen is cheerfully impervious to his tone. He tosses his keys and catches them and hops over the side of the Miata. He is dressed loosely in a pair of black gi trousers and a gold vest belted loosely over his bare chest.

“You look – uh,” says Johnny, taking it all in; hot. “Good,” he finishes.

“And you look like leading man I would kick in face in final fight,” says Chozen, approving. He spreads his arms. “Now – where are we going?”

Johnny jerks his head. “This way.”

They fall in step together, heading down the cramped, cracked sidewalk. A passing woman gives them a strange look over the large bag of laundry in her arms. Johnny presses his lips together and nods at her, and she hurriedly looks away. Well, whatever.

“Hey, you ever think about being the uh – what you said, the leading man?” he asks.

“Sure,” says Chozen readily. “Most recent script agent sent, I am main character.”

“That's great!” Johnny glances and notices his expression. He raises his eyebrows. “What, don't like the script or something?”

“Script is fine,” he says.

They arrive in front of the seedy gym Howard had given up. “Then what's the problem?”

“Filming is on location in Okinawa.”

“Oh.” Johnny thinks about this as he absently pulls the door open for Chozen. “You can't go back there, right? Or you don't want to? Is that why you're hiding from your agent?”

Chozen's agent couldn't have broken five feet and wore a pretty green three-piece skirt suit with matching heels, but Chozen had reacted to the sight of her like she was the combined military forces of NATO. Johnny wanted to be generous with him, but it was tough seeing a grown man so reduced.

Chozen steps over the threshold, insisting, “I am not *hiding* from Chin. I am punishing her with my absence. To be so callous with my feelings, what kind of agent does such a thing?”

Johnny shrugs and follows him inside. He glances around the room: two guys on heavy bags, one lifting a barbell in the back corner, another two hanging around by the water fountain. He reaches behind him for the tab on the door and twists, locking them all inside.

“Maybe you could make the movie and just keep a low profile?” he suggests.

“Nothing happens there without my uncle knowing,” is the dark reply.

The two men by the water fountain have noticed them but aren't approaching; not involved then, probably.

“You don't want to risk it?” presses Johnny as he slips off his shoes and sets them against the wall by the door. He straightens up and starts folding his sleeves. “You think he'd show up or something?”

The man in the corner sets the barbell down and says something to the two on the bags. They twist around and gape over at Johnny and Chozen.

“I think – maybe he wouldn't,” says Chozen, after an odd pause.

“Oh,” says Johnny, suddenly getting it.

There are many reasons he has never returned to the country club,

even though the guys have met up there plenty times over the years. Foremost is the idea that he might see his mom there: that she might see him. See him and immediately turn her back and leave.

“That sucks, man,” he says honestly, as the three men start heading their way, weaving through the gym equipment. They're saying something, not that it really matters.

Chozen nods and gives him a small, solemn smile. “Daniel-san and Susan talk like you are clueless, but somehow – I sensed. You understand.”

“Yeah,” says Johnny ducking his head and giving an awkward shrug. “Yeah, I do.”

Without missing a beat, Chozen turns and snaps a leg up; his flip-flop flies like a dart and hits the first man square in the forehead. He staggers back into his friends, and Johnny drops to sweep his leg, and it's all over not too long after that.

“This place,” says Chozen, after, “it's a dump.”

“I know, right?” Johnny finishes tying the last man up with a jump rope. He stays down on one knee afterwards, figuring it's probably better for his spine if he doesn't swing so low from a standing position.

“You realize what this means?”

The city's Health department wasn't doing its job. “What does it mean?”

“They sent – *B team* after you,” says Chozen, disgusted.

Johnny thinks of Howard. “Yeah, I think you're right,” he says.

“So whoever is behind this,” he continues, waving a hand at the gym. “They underestimate you, and your friends.” And Johnny likes that Chozen has just called them friends; he basically already knew, of course, but it is always nice to get confirmation. “I suppose this means it is not that loud, rude man you train with.”

Johnny blinks, surprised. He looks up at Chozen. “Sensei Kreese? Why would you think it's him?”

Chozen only stares at him, expressionless but for arched eyebrows.

“My sensei would never hurt me,” says Johnny. It makes no sense.

Who deliberately blunts their best knife?

“Okay,” says Chozen, putting his hands up and drawing the word out. “If you say so.” He puts his hands on his hips and regards the five men on the floor, who to a man stare back at him with wide eyes. “We should not hurt them too badly,” he reflects.

Vague muffled noises of agreement issue from behind the makeshift gags Johnny has tied around their heads. The nearest man wriggles and Johnny has to poke and prod him back into the clump.

“Because Daniel would be upset?” he guesses.

Chozen makes a slight face and clarifies, “INS frown on assault – might revoke my work visa.”

“Oh. Okay. Good point.” He turns back to the men and asks, “So, who feels like talking?”

Oddly, they all do. Turns out working with other people is kind of awesome.

Chapter 72: Everything That Sinks Must Converge

After not too long, Kreese exits the dojo and locks up. He disappears around the corner of the block and at Daniel's urging (*quickly, quickly, you're going to lose him*), Robert eases down the street and takes a left in time for them to see Kreese get into a car parked along curb.

“Is that a *Rolls*?” asks Daniel in disbelief, as the gleaming car in question smoothly passes them going the opposite direction; Kreese stern behind the wheel. “Good christ, just how much were you all paying that man to shout in your faces every day?”

Robert curses under his breath and checks his mirrors before swinging out in a wide U-turn. They cut off a caravan speeding up towards them; it registers its displeasure through extensive use of its horn.

“I mean, I know the dojo was made up of hills kids," says Daniel. "I didn't think the man was living hand-to-mouth or anything, but still. Wow. Maybe Mr. Miyagi should've opened up a dojo back when we were struggling to get the bonsai shop off the ground. A little dojo on the side. Karate, who knew – wait.” A thought strikes him, and his eyes go wide. “Was he selling drugs out of the dojo this whole time? Like, steroids? Your tempers *were* pretty over the top back in the day. You know that stuff's actually really dangerous? Lyle Alzado, man. Two-time All-Pro but look where it got him.” Daniel clucks his tongue in disapproval.

They slow to a stop in a line of traffic at a red light. Robert turns his head and stares hard at Daniel, who has absolutely been doing it on purpose. Certain types of people just bring it out in him, it's not his fault.

He gives his best Johnny-face back at the other man and after a few seconds, Robert returns his attention to the street, defeated. Damn, that's useful as hell.

“What bugs you more,” asks Daniel, curious, “the accusation of drug use or the knowledge you were all being severely overcharged?”

Robert grits his teeth. The brake lights flicker off in front of them and he continues driving. Kreese is three cars ahead of them.

“I never really understood the man's finances,” he says grudgingly

after a few blocks, surprising Daniel. “We used to talk about it when we were kids – came up with crazy theories about where all the money came from.”

“Crazy theories, like?”

He shrugs. “Dutch was sure he found some rich French guy's plantation in Vietnam, looted everything in sight.”

“Isn't it more likely he just comes from money?” says Daniel, and Robert immediately huffs a skeptical laugh. “What?”

“Nothing,” says Robert, shaking his head at the street, “just – Kreese doesn't come from money.”

“How do you know?”

“Trust me. He doesn't. Sometimes you can just tell,” he explains.

Daniel bites the side of his tongue and very diplomatically says nothing more. If someone was keeping score here, they might call them tied.

“Where is this guy *going*?” wonders Daniel aloud, leaning forward to look at the houses mostly hidden by gates and big trees. “You ever been up this way before?”

“No,” says Bobby, braking to avoid taking the upcoming turn too close after Kreese. “I think Mr. Schechner has a client who lives around here, but I've never been myself – one of the partners at my firm,” he explains, when he notices Daniel's questioning look.

“Maybe this is where Kreese actually lives,” he says, speculative. He flaps a hand at the windshield. “I mean, sure, why not. High school karate sensei works in the valley during the day and comes home to a lap of luxury at night. Does this – hey, he can overlook his whole domain from up here, I bet.”

“I always figured he lived right next to the dojo,” admits Bobby.

“That is such a teenager thing to think,” says Daniel.

“Yeah, guess so.”

Daniel looks off to the side of the road, getting little glimpses of the view between the properties as they wind up the hill. There's something...

“Hey," he says abruptly, "you ever read uh, *Discipline and Punish*?” Bobby's brow pinches, and he gives Daniel a weird look, and okay, who knows what they teach people in college, he thought maybe there was a fair chance. “It's a book by—”

“I know it,” interrupts Bobby, still giving him a strange side-eye. “*Why*?”

He shrugs. “I don't know. Just thinking about everything with this Kreese guy. Johnny and the rest of you, the way you were about your little club.” The way Johnny still is, sometimes, about some things.

“You're comparing Cobra Kai to the Panopticon?” And his tone says what he thinks of the idea.

“I don't think it's that much of a reach,” says Daniel mildly, and then he forgets the conversation because, “is that Susan's car?”

Bobby jerks his gaze back to the road, and he hits the brakes. A bright yellow Saab is inexplicably parked on the street a little ways up; the wheels are not turned in towards the curb as per the California Driver Handbook's safety guidelines for parking on an incline. Has to be Susan, thinks Daniel.

Just past the Saab, Kreese turns into a driveway. They pull to the side of the road and watch as he enters a code. The dark gate slides open to let him in.

“What the hell is going on?” mutters Bobby, and he cuts the engine. They get out of the BMW and stare up at the house that sits at the dead center of the road's curve, the pale face of the eastern Hollywood foothills rising up behind it.

“I've seen this house somewhere,” says Daniel.

“Yeah, me too," says Bobby slowly. "Can't remember where, though.”

“This is so fucking weird,” he says, and then he slaps the top of the car. “Okay. Well – we going in or what?”

Bobby gives him a certain look: for the suggestion or for touching the precious car, who can say. “What do you want to do, walk up to the

gate and knock?"

"I don't know, what do you think Susan did? We're not gonna *leave*, so – c'mon, it's worth a shot." And he checks for traffic before crossing the road. At his back, the beemer beeps once; Bobby locking up.

They make it maybe ten feet before the strange situation gets even stranger.

"*Daniel!*" comes a whisper-shout from behind, and he and Bobby look around to find the Saab's passenger door open, and Ali Mills standing up out of the car. Her new haircut looks really great, is the first thing he notices; no wonder Susan made a fool of herself.

"What are you doing here?" she and Daniel ask each other. She notices his company and her expression turns even more confused. "And Robert? What is going on?"

Daniel jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "Susan go in there?"

She hesitates. Then her shoulders slump, and she steps free to close the car door. She checks for traffic and crosses to them.

"She did, along with Johnny and your movie star friend. I have no idea what's going on and didn't want to get involved, so I said I'd wait by the car."

Daniel's stomach dips a little and he lets his head fall back. "Oh jeez, this is not gonna be good." Maybe they should find a telephone now, put an ambulance on standby.

"And here I thought we had enough class reunion to last us all another ten years," says Bobby, and please, the less said about that night the better.

The three of them look at each other.

"So," she says eventually. "Are we going in?"

"I thought you weren't getting involved," says Daniel.

Alas: wrong thing to say; she folds her arms over her chest. "I'm not going to be the only person left sitting outside, twiddling my thumbs."

"Why not?" he says, agonized, because he'd love nothing more than to sit out here twiddling *his* thumbs. But he doesn't get that choice. "Since when do you let yourself get swayed by the crowd? Don't start

making bad choices now. You're getting married soon, you have so much to live for!" Greg's not *that* bad, he doesn't add, and the depressing thing is, he mostly even means it; last time he talked to the guy, they had a pretty decent conversation about Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*.

She stares at him some more until Bobby announces he's going to go buzz the gate and abandons them to their face-off. Giving up, Daniel turns and he and Ali fall in beside one another.

"So you drove here with Susan," he says, not meaning to distract from the subject of the mysterious convention of karate assholes on a hill, but, well – it begs the question, doesn't it. Susan and Ali. Ali and Susan.

"Yes."

Okay, not the most forth-coming. He purses his lips. "So... you've talked to Susan."

"Not exactly the term I would use," she says evenly.

"Okay, well – you know, if you could just," he rushes to say, "maybe not mention, uh, what I – what I said last night—"

She looks at him incredulously. "Daniel, seriously?"

"Right, yeah. Not the time." He nods briskly. "Got it."

"You're really not in a position right now to be dictating who says what to whom," she says pointedly.

And what is *that* supposed to mean!

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demands.

She raises her eyebrows. "It means, I don't know – when were you going to mention you're dating Johnny Lawrence? I mean, you certainly didn't say anything about it at the reunion—"

"Look, there was nothing to tell, alright," he says, harried. "It's only been a few weeks."

"Uh, seemed to me like he was living with you," she says skeptically, which, what, did she go by the house earlier?

"Yeah, I mean. He is, but look," he insists, when she has the

predictable response to this, “it's kind of special circumstances, okay —”

“You know, I'm not even surprised?" she says. “This whole thing is *so* you. Boundaries? No, not for Daniel LaRusso. He has to fix everything for everyone.”

“Oh my *god*,” he exclaims, fed up, and Bobby turns around to shush them both, his expression a little overwhelmed.

“Like working in a damn zoo,” he grates out, shaking his head. He turns back to the gate and presses the button on the intercom. They wait but no voice comes; after a second, the gate buzzes and starts sliding open.

“Well, that's not disturbing at all,” reflects Daniel, looking at the empty, clear path stretching ahead of them towards the stark lines of the house. “Someone wants us to walk into their creepy, strangely familiar mansion without even knowing our names or reason for visiting. Great.”

“The house is from Blade Runner,” says Ali, and he and Bobby immediately make twin sounds of relieved revelation. “Your friend Chozen recognized it immediately.”

They walk through the gate and up the path, necks craning as they take in the layers of extruding rectangular facade. Blade Runner, that's right. Deckard's home, full of trinkets and shadows and loneliness.

The door bursts open just before they reach it, and a uniformed servant rushes out. He glances at them as he passes, eyes finding Daniel's and sticking.

“I wouldn't go in there,” he says to him.

“Why, what's happening?” Daniel asks, but the man doesn't stop to explain. *Fuck this job* floats back to them before he disappears through the gate and around the corner of the hedge. Daniel looks back at Bobby and Ali and shrugs.

They don't say anything more as they move to the door and enter the house.

They find themselves at the top of a long dark hallway that somehow feels smaller than its physical dimensions suggest possible. The late afternoon sunlight peeks through perforations in the stone blocks that

make up the wall of the entryway, dappling their faces as they look around. The house feels very empty.

A sound drifts down the corridor from deeper in the house: dull and rhythmic.

“What is that?” asks Ali in a whisper.

They listen for a moment longer, until urgency steals across Bobby's face.

"*John*," he says and he takes off down the hallway in a dead sprint, Daniel and Ali scrambling after him.

Chapter 73: Everything That Sinks Must Converge

Susan tries not to notice or care too badly the way Ali's nose wrinkles upon getting into her car. She chooses to focus on the relief, instead; Ali getting into her car probably means she isn't massively unable to cope with her best friend being a lesbian, and almost certainly means she hasn't put two and two together and gotten *my best friend is in love with me*.

“Since when do you smoke?” says Ali.

Oh, right. That.

Susan hits the brakes a few feet into reversing out of her parking spot and rolls down her window. She snatches the pack of cigarettes and throws them out of the car. (*That was mostly full!* goes an agonized voice, and weirdly it sounds a lot like Daniel, which makes no sense because he hates her smoking; it must just be that the agonized voice is a little bitch, she thinks.) She rolls the window back up and resumes reversing.

“I don't smoke,” she says.

“Right.” Ali bites her lip and then very visibly decides not to pursue the topic further; thank god. If Susan had to defend a smoking habit she barely even has with everything else hanging over them, she isn't sure she could handle it.

“It was a work thing,” she explains briefly, shifting gears. “And now, since I no longer have work – it's no longer a thing.”

“That guy,” says Ali after a moment, tone significant.

“Yep.” She says it long and cool, like maybe she's stalling for time and might get back to the house before she has to pop the p.

“You always said he was a real piece of work but – seeing him in action was kind of shocking. That he thinks he can talk to people like that.”

“He *can* talk to people like that,” says Susan. She pulls out of the parking garage, cutting off a charter bus.

“Well, right,” says Ali. “But that he thinks he can get away with it, I mean.”

“He does get away with it,” she says and for no reason she can fathom, she hears it come out a little annoyed. “He puts on a good face for the clients but even then he sometimes doesn't bother. No one cares, there's nothing to be done. People either accept it or they disappear. Like what I'm doing right now.”

“I'm sorry,” says Ali.

The lights above go yellow and Susan speeds up to pass through the intersection. “Why? Not my problem anymore – I quit. I'm free!”

She almost grows lightheaded with the second wind of relief. When she wakes up tomorrow, she won't have to look at her wardrobe and pick something out with Paul in mind; she won't have to rush through her morning with every passing second screaming like the beeping detonator on a bomb; she won't have to go back to that office – ever again. Susan starts to smile.

“No, I meant – I mean, yes, I'm sorry it was so awful too,” says Ali meanwhile. “Hopefully your next job will be better.”

The smile fades. Static threatens on the periphery of her awareness. Susan looks at the road and says, a little dully, “Yeah. Hopefully.”

She thinks of Johnny and his own plans for avoiding employment. That was kind of working out for him so far? If only Susan had spent her teenage years getting brainwashed and inducted into a violent combat sport. Girls really never get opportunities like that.

“The woman who came with you to the reunion,” says Ali, and Susan's hands tighten over the steering wheel immediately, “was she – she was, right. Your girlfriend?”

To her credit, she doesn't sound any particular way when she says the word. Or maybe she's just trying very hard not to sound any particular way, or maybe Susan's trying very hard not to hear it.

“That was Marty, yeah,” she says. She speeds through an intersection beneath a yellow light.

Near the end, Marty started talking constantly about how she didn't know most of Susan's friends. In a fit of reckless fatalism, Susan decided that night to rectify the situation. It hadn't gone well. Marty

was standoffish and rude the whole time, and not even in the usual funny way.

“She seemed to really dislike me,” says Ali.

“Marty doesn't like anyone,” breezes Susan, and she gives a short, bright laugh. “Including me!”

Wait, did that sound kind of pathetic? That might've sounded really pathetic. She narrows her eyes and turned onto the freeway on-ramp. She'd been going for cheerful indifference. If Daniel was here, he'd have a lot of pointed things to say about her spending the past several weeks leaking mascara all over his crummy house, but he's not, so she gets to pretend she's over everything. It is critical she be over everything, because nothing is going to stop coming.

“I thought maybe she was jealous,” continues Ali, and Susan has to work hard to not react to that on any level. “Of our friendship. One of those people, you know. And I thought, that's so incredibly high school... and there we were, at the school. Guess it was appropriate.”

“Speaking of high school, guess who we're meeting back at the house? Johnny Lawrence.” Susan glances at her expectantly. “Crazy, right? He and the guys got into this rumble at a barbecue yesterday and—”

“Susan, I spent way too much time as a teenager talking about Johnny Lawrence and karate,” Ali says flatly, somehow unfazed by the name. “Do you really think I have any interest in talking about that *right now*?”

Susan feels vaguely offended, her gossip's pride bruised. This is Johnny Lawrence they're apparently not going to talk about – Ali's first boyfriend! West Valley High's closeted problem child! The Class of 85's Voted Most Likely to Die in a War!

“It's not like it's the same thing as it was,” she says. After all, this time Daniel is totally fucking Johnny; this is probably too much information for Ali to take in at the moment, however. “Like, Johnny's the good guy now.”

“Is he.”

Susan blinks and thinks about that. While she thinking about it, Ali turns a little in her seat and unfolds the hands in her lap and refolds the hands in her lap and says:

“Look, I didn't come with you to tag along on whatever ridiculous karate drama they have going on. And I didn't show up at your office to help you walk out – though I'm glad you quit, of course I am. I'm really glad. But I came to apologize for yesterday. And I thought maybe you could do the same, and then hopefully we could go from there.”

“What do I have to apologize for,” says Susan blankly.

Ali does not like this. When she speaks again, she sounds frustrated. “When things went bad with Marty – did you really not want to tell me anything about it? Are you honestly okay pushing me away and never talking or sharing your life with me? Because if that's the case, maybe you should just pull the car over and let me out right now.”

“We're on the 405,” Susan points out.

Ali looks out the passenger window. She says nothing.

Susan closes her eyes briefly but only briefly because she's going seventy miles per hour and no matter how uncomfortable she is right now, she is pretty sure she'll be a lot less comfortable if the Saab veers into a semi, and also she would prefer not to kill Ali.

She wishes she was the kind of person whose main reaction to this conversation was not that she wishes she wasn't having it. She wishes she was the kind of person who didn't hurt her friend, or at least felt worse about it when she did – enough to be motivated to change, or stop. But she has always been pretty selfish (Number two on Marty's list of complaints, as it happens).

“I don't talk to Daniel because we're in the same club,” she says.

Ali looks over. “What?”

“What you said, yesterday—”

Ali grimaces. “I didn't mean it like that. That wasn't fair – I was upset, I'm sorry.”

“It's fine. I mean, I'm offended you think I'd be in any club he was a member of, but it's fine.”

She shakes her head, undeterred. “You guys have been getting closer for ages and, I don't know. I was already feeling the distance and then suddenly I am maybe also moving to Denver? I was jealous.”

“That is so incredibly high school,” drawls Susan and she has to pretend not to notice or care too much when Ali lights up the car with a grin and rolls her eyes sidelong at her. She returns her attention to the road. “I talk to Daniel because he doesn't make me talk about things seriously.”

“Susan,” she says with lingering amusement, “he complains to me *constantly* that you refuse to talk about things seriously.”

“Okay, so he's kinda pathetic and ineffectual,” she says, nonplussed. “Same difference – lower stakes.”

“And what if you talked to me unseriously too? Would those stakes be acceptable to you?”

Susan pretends to check her side mirror in order to sneak a look at Ali's expression; *so* earnest. She changes lanes and takes the exit. She taps the underside of the steering wheel. She breathes in and out and pushes forward, saying:

“I was worried you'd look at me differently.” She stares hard at the cracked and pitted street. “Maybe not even bad, but – different. It seemed better to stick with what I knew, what always worked for us.”

“What if I wanted to look at you differently?” asks Ali.

Susan presses the gas pedal with a foot she cannot really feel; the speedometer says she's going fully five under so it's probably fine.

Paul always said, knowledge is control. Know more than the other person you're negotiating with, and you can direct the conversation where you like without the other person even sensing the hand. Before she told Ali the truth, she never had to think twice about anything Ali said, never had to wonder. She'd already put all conversations on a hundred-mile bypass detour.

“What do you mean?” she asks finally, and to her relief, her voice sounds fine. It comes out strong; it comes out hard.

“...I don't know,” comes the reply; Ali is frustrated again. “Maybe I want to look at you differently because you *are* different. Different than I thought. Would that be so terrible? Different doesn't have to be worse.”

Susan relaxes, everything in her subsiding all at once. She flicks her fingers. “You sound like someone auditioning for Sesame Street.”

Another darting smile. “Oh, shut up.”

“Hey, I thought you wanted me to talk,” says Susan.

Despite being unmoved at the mention of his name and despite what she'd said about not being interested in the ridiculous karate drama, the first thing Ali does when they arrive back at the house is smile at Johnny. It's a real one, too – all the more sweet for the slight reluctance at the corners, like she just can't help herself the moment she's looking at him.

“Hi Johnny,” she says.

Johnny had startled up from the kitchen table when they walked in and then gone into his freak statue mode. “Hi,” he says, voice very soft, and ugh.

Maybe they're both thinking it: in another life, if everything and everyone had been completely different and right, they could've been high school sweethearts who went on to get married after school and then furthered the tragedy by having a carload of blonde, blue-eyed babies Susan would have to pretend to love. Even with Johnny's dick remaining softer than a plush toy every time Ali touched it, it had taken almost two years for them to break up. Susan credits them for preparing her emotionally for her parents' current divorce.

She rolls her eyes and cuts across their sight lines to dump the master rolodex from the office on the table.

“You almost look like a normal person,” she tells Johnny, who absolutely does not look like a normal person, because his face, it turns out, *is* pretty banged up. Even she is surprised she hadn't noticed the previous night. “What's with the suit?”

“You must be Chozen,” Ali is saying behind her. “I've heard so much about you.”

“And I, you. You are even more beautiful than described.”

“Did you find the name?” asks Johnny, tearing his gaze away from where Chozen was suavely kissing Ali's hand.

“Would I have bothered bringing this thing if I had?” asks Susan, flicking the rolodex. “Let's just say I got interrupted.”

“She quit her job,” reports Ali, coming to stand at her side.

“Sorry,” says Johnny, which Susan doesn't get until she does.

She gives him a scathing look. “No, I really quit, doofus. Now what was that name? If it's not in here, we're giving up on all this and going to get drinks.”

“A good plan,” says Chozen.

“I can't drink, I have training tomorrow,” says Johnny.

“It's *Monday afternoon*,” says Ali.

And it's just as well they don't have to continue that conversation, because Susan actually finds a business card to match the name. She takes it out of the sleeve and straightens, reading aloud to her gathered hangers-on:

“Terrance Silver, C.E.O. Dynatox Industries.” She flips the card over to where Paul sometimes wrote notes, and sure enough in his spidery cursive: “2607 Glendower Ave. Martial arts. Cynthia Rothrock. JCVD.”

“What's that mean, does that guy know Van Damme?” asks Johnny with a trace of urgency.

She shrugs and shakes her head. “More likely, he's a fan and Paul was keeping track of what he could be hit up for – for investing, or something like that.”

“So – we are going, yes?" says Chozen. "We shall take my car.”

“Your,” Susan looks up at him in surprise. “You didn't actually drive here, did you? You don't have a license. Daniel will be *insufferable* if he sees that car outside.”

“Why so critical? I thought we agreed – Daniel-san is uptight about laws. And I notice, you have not said anything about the new window.”

Susan checks her immediate response. She and Ali lean around the guys to look into the kitchen.

The old window had been a small square pane behind the sink; the

crank to swing it open was lost before Daniel bought the place and Daniel never got around to sourcing a replacement, so every time they needed to get fresh air in the place they had to use the ones by the kitchen table. Once, after Susan set off the fire alarm, they even had to prop open the doors to the backyard.

The new window is framed in a warm, pale wood and set back on a generous sill. The light it welcomes into the room reaches along the length of both counters, even makes the ceiling seem taller. It is surprisingly easy to picture Daniel standing there, hands moving industriously through that light; turning his head to say something to them over his shoulder.

“That window is way too nice for this house,” is Susan's conclusion.

Ali nudges her in the side immediately. “Oh, stop. You're always so down about this place.”

“Well, yeah, it's a dump.” If she keeps going, maybe Ali will touch her again.

Backfire: she frowns. “You know, Daniel's put a lot of work into this house. I think it's a come a long way since he bought it.”

Susan refuses to feel bad about something she knows both Johnny and Chozen agree with her about. Sometimes the majority *is* correct, actually.

“So,” she says, looking back at Johnny. “Are we driving out to this Terrance guy's place or what?”

“I thought we were going to talk some more,” Ali says to her and Susan widens her eyes meaningfully at Johnny, who looks between the two of them.

“Yeah,” he says after a moment, and Susan thanks the universe for his single-minded karate obsession. “Let me leave a note for Daniel, and then we can go.”

Chapter 74: Everything That Sinks Must Converge

Johnny thinks about changing before they leave, but in the end he decides against it; he doesn't know anything about this Terrance Silver. The suit seems safest. He has already found he can fight well enough in it, if it comes to that.

Susan drives and Ali takes the passenger seat without hesitation, which leave Johnny and Chozen to climb into the back seat. He's never had to sit back here before. It's small. Their knees are nudged right up against the front seats. He shifts, uncomfortable.

“Don't kick my seat,” orders Susan immediately. He looks up to meet her narrowed eyes in the rearview mirror.

“I'm,” *not* he starts to say, but with Ali present he can hear how childish it will sound; he stops talking and puts his head back against the seat.

After a moment, his eyes slide over to the passenger seat, taking in again the smooth swoop of pale hair curving over the delicate shell of her ear, the soft line of her jaw.

“Heard you're getting married,” he says and is rewarded with her head turning, her sharp eyes finding his. “Is he a dick?”

She is surprised into a small laugh. “Uh, no – he's um. Very nice. Not my usual type, I know,” she adds dryly, though of course he wouldn't know her usual type these days.

“Then congrats,” he says.

“Thank you.” She hesitates and says, “So, Johnny. You're uh, with Daniel?”

“More like he showed up a few weeks ago and just never left,” says Susan, and Johnny deliberately but subtly digs his knees into the back of her seat. He doesn't like how she makes it sound, like it was just a random thing that could be undone just as easily.

“You really moving to Colorado?” he asks Ali instead of replying, and he thinks maybe Susan glares at him in the mirror, but why would he look at Susan when he can look at Ali? She might be moving soon,

after all. Limited opportunity.

Ali glances at Susan almost too quick to catch, her mouth wavering open uncertainly before reaching for the words. “Yeah, maybe. Nothing's decided yet.”

“You know they don't have an ocean in Colorado,” he says knowledgeably. “Like, sure, they have mountains. But so what, California's got mountains. We got everything.”

Ali's mouth hooks up on one side. “They've got winters there. California doesn't have winters.”

“And since when do you like being cold?” he says, because he can remember more than one night out by the ocean, in the backseat of his car: the salt breeze rolling in with the crashing waves and Ali curled close and warm at his side. The way her body made his seem quiet and right, and the way she used to look at him like she never doubted it could be any other way.

She twists in her seat so she can face him fully. “Haven't you ever wanted a change of scenery?”

“I have lived many places,” says Chozen beside him, when Johnny doesn't find a reply quick enough and the moment threatens to turn awkward. “And LA is – one of them,” he finishes.

“You're from Okinawa, right?” Ali asks him keenly. “Do you get to visit home often? I know Mr. Miyagi and his wife try to make a trip every year—”

“I can never go home,” he says. “I am in exile.”

Ali's eyes widen a little, which Chozen finds very gratifying, and the rest of the drive passes safely enough in the embrace of his story.

“Okay, but do you think he bought this place *because* he liked Blade Runner?” asks Johnny as the butler leads them into the house. “Is that something you can just do?”

“If you have enough money, you can do anything,” says Susan, head craned to peer up at the hanging basket lights lining the length of the hallway.

“I'd buy the fortress from Enter the Dragon." And fuck in every room, except maybe the mirrored one. "What about you?” he asks Chozen.

He thinks about it for a few steps. “Statue of Liberty."

Johnny checks his nod. “The real one or the one in Vegas?”

At the end of the hallway, the wall of patterned blocks fragment into columns, and through the space allowed they see a wide room, open on the other end to a patio overlooking an impressionistic city in the distance through the smog. The room is bright and airy after the confines of the pathway that had led to it.

In the sunlight on the patio, a man sits reading from the middle of a battered blue paperback: *Catch-22;* Johnny wonders if Daniel knows it.

“Visitors, Mr. Silver,” says the butler, and the man looks up with a bright gaze – a gaze predisposed to being pleased by whatever it landed upon, because he makes a point of arranging for it to be so.

Johnny finds himself looking at the man who had been in the dojo that morning. He doesn't know what to think.

“Oh,” says Silver, face falling into something between disappointment and boredom. “It's you.”

It's you, that guy Howard had shouted, sobbing. *It's you, only you. We were supposed to take you out.*

“Who are you?” asks Johnny.

Silver tucks a finger into his book to save his place and closes it in his lap. He doesn't get up, just puts his head to the side and regards them.

Johnny crosses the room slowly, eyes sweeping the space and the man, trying to absorb as many details as he can and still not coming up with anything like an explanation.

He'd felt so relieved when Chozen attacked him in Daniel's backyard; he'd thought: finally. Now he just thinks, no. Something has switched from feeling very right to very wrong, and he doesn't understand why.

“Why are you after me?” he asks.

“Look,” says Silver frankly, leaving the book in his lap and spreading his hands. “I'm afraid neither of us is going to get much satisfaction from this conversation. Perhaps we can reschedule. Say – tomorrow,

first thing? We can meet at the dojo."

Johnny thinks of him lounging around with a mug like he owned the place. "And what's the dojo to you?"

"I own it."

"John Kreese owns Cobra Kai," says Johnny with a trace of impatience. "He has forever."

"Oh, I own him too," says Silver comfortably.

Johnny stares.

Silver abandons the book and unfolds his long body from the chair – takes in the way Johnny immediately shifts into a ready stance with glancing, wrinkled-brow amusement. He gives him a sarcastically wide berth and walks over to a drink cart.

"Want anything? No? How about for the other gentleman and the lady?" he asks, turning to look at Chozen and Susan, still hanging back between the columns.

"Well, actually," begins Susan.

Chozen interrupts her. "No. We are just fine." He ignores the finger she stabs into his ribs in favor of staring Silver down hard.

But Silver isn't interested in being stared down. Silver is already turning back to his own drink to deposit two perfect cubes of ice in the center of his lowball glass. He pours a generous serving of caramel-smooth liquor from a crystal decanter. He grips the glass by the rim and gives it a satisfied swirl. Clink, clink.

Johnny breaks again. "So – what, he owes you money or something? Is that why you came after me, to send him a message?"

Silver laughs. "What Johnny *owes* me is the kind of debt that can't be repaid – and I him," he adds, looking around with bright-eyed earnestness. "To be fair."

He takes a drink. When he lowers the glass again, his wide mouth has deepened at the corners and his eyes have gone dark.

"You know, I guess I can kind of see it now, with you dressed like this," he says thoughtfully, and there's a trace of bitterness ruining the tone. "The appeal it had for him: young rich boy hanging onto his

every word, *oh, yes Sensei, anything, Sensei.* The illusion of no one being able to deny him."

That feeling from the morning is back in the room, and Johnny finds he likes it even less now than he had then.

"Look, does this have something to do with the Ultimate Fighting Championship?" he asks, trying to drag the conversation back to something useful. He can't think of anything else it might be: the timing of it all.

He has fallen out of fighting stance and barely noticed. He is so confused, and his mind is fighting every detail, trying to push them to arms length where they might possibly be arranged to make more sense.

"Is that what he told you the training was for?" Silver looks at him with cold pity. "Kid, that tournament was *my* idea for Cobra Kai. John refuses to join the soon-to-be twenty-first century."

He shakes his head, relieved to have something concrete he can refute. "No, you're wrong. I've got a fight coming up—"

"Yes, against my fighter," says Silver. He gestures with his glass. "We have an agreement. Winner gets his way – but I'm afraid you're fighting against your own interests. You win that fight and I guarantee, you're not going anywhere near the UFC." He pauses, reflective. "John might let you help with some of the younger classes? But I don't know what use he'd have for you beyond that."

Johnny's face grows hot with humiliation. He glances at Chozen and Susan but aborts before he can read their faces. He doesn't know where to look. His pulse is pounding in his ears, an all too familiar tension singing through his body.

It doesn't make sense. It just doesn't make any sense. He's going to fight in a couple weeks, establish a, a profile, and then he's going to – there's a tournament. Sumo wrestlers? He's going to fight. That's the future. He's going to fight. All he can do is fight, because if he's not fighting, if he's not a fighter, then the hits mean something else. If he's not a fighter, he's just a—

"I'm sorry he made you think you mattered," says Silver, and his voice sounds like it's coming through a tin can on a string. "If it's any consolation, he did the same to me for years."

“What the hell is this?” says a new voice: an old voice. The only voice.

They both turn towards the columns, where Kreese has appeared, and Silver smiles like a sigh.

“Hey there, lover,” he says.

Chapter 75: Crime / Punishment

your teacher came to see me,
his mom said that day.
He barely even looked at Johnny at first, is the thing.
Kreese stepped into the room, glanced around, and turned his attention towards Silver. “Is this really what it's come to?” he asked him harshly.
(“Oh my god,” says Susan in a tone of fascinated recognition. “Oh my god, this is too good. No way.”)
“I don't know what you're talking about, John,” says Silver, sipping his scotch. “I was relaxing here at home when your student and his friends burst in here.”
“*Butler* let us in,” Chozen interjected stiffly. “I broke no law.”
Kreese ignored him. “It's come to my attention you've been targeting my fighter ahead of our match.”
He made a faint disagreeing noise. “As I recall, we didn't set any terms about fair play. And you know what they say about love and war.”
when she told him he couldn't stay,
the word *love* was never spoken aloud;
the life she said he was choosing
would not only lack love—
it precluded its very existence.
(“I can't wait to rub this in Tommy's face for the rest of time,” says Susan, marveling.)
Kreese's expression twisted and he finally looked at Johnny. A caught-out glance, furious and surprisingly awkward. Human.
For a second, he looked like he hated Johnny for being there, for possessing eyes to see and ears to hear.
“You didn't sign the papers last night,” said Silver, shrugging, “but I'm feeling generous – I swear to stop interfering with your fighter. There. How's that?” He blinked and in between the fall of his lashes, his eyes slid slyly to Johnny. He smiled. “If you still have a fighter, that is.”
are you a fighter or aren't you?
asked sensei the first time johnny bled
in the dojo. he gripped his face
(hands so big and firm, not hesitating
to touch, to cradle and own)
and wiped the blood beneath his nose.
see, he said, what's the big deal?
there's always more where that came from.
Kreese turned to him, expression wiping blank. “Mr Lawrence –

Johnny."
"Oh here it comes," said Silver. "The big play. The reasonable tone. Why don't you tell the truth for a change, John? Tell the boy why you called him up, why you got back in touch after all this time. Years of being content with new students to mold, why seek out this has-been now?"
Kreese reached for him, but Johnny pivoted, avoiding contact. He looked at the man's hand.
why do you have to fight
all the time, demanded ali, drawing away
from his touch like it was something
dirty, *it's dirty, don't you see,*
johnny? how can you want
that, what did i ever do, what did I
miss, you miss another training,
mister lawrence, and i'll have you off
the team, and what will you be then?
you're just a fucking animal, aren't you,
said the boy who kissed him softly yesterday
with a mouth now bruised from johnny's hand
and the hand is soft from that yuppie's life
and the hand is punishing around his cock
and the hand is bleeding but not enough.
"Some kicked dogs always come back," reflected Silver. "And some people just can't stop kicking dogs."
He didn't want to be touched. He thought maybe he couldn't be touched; it'd trip some kind of alarm. Detonation rippling across his skin.
("Johnny, maybe we should go," says Susan. She doesn't sound entertained anymore. She sounds nervous. "C'mon, let's just – let's just go, okay. Chozen, would you do something?")
Kreese's face folded into exasperation. He stepped forward, hand still outstretched, and tried to talk to him.
"I don't know what this man told you, but you can't listen to him. He is a hopeless loser. He'll say anything. I saved his life back in 'Nam, and he can't handle the burden of that debt. He's always pushing."
guy pushed his luck,
what did he expect?
he pushed me, it's his fault,
he shouldn't have pushed me.
let's teach them a lesson:
don't ever push us.
look, i'm trying to be nice here,
but you keep pushing me.

if you'd just stop trying to push all the time.
it's not ruined.
(“Johnny?”)
“Johnny.”
Johnny grabbed Kreese's hand to pull him off-balance, and his sensei was as touchable as anyone else. His body susceptible to the same physics.
He lurched forward, and Johnny's fist found him, the way it has found so many before. It's the hit. He's the hit.
And he can never stop.

Chapter 76: The Man with the Golden Fist - III

Samuel Lee was twenty-three and five-eleven with a kick that snapped like a bull whip, his smile almost as fast. He came into the gym on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and over the months it just so happened that Tuesdays and Thursdays became Johnny's favorite days of the week.

“You've outgrown him, you know,” said Sam one day.

“What?” Johnny glanced away from his spot on the bag, brow wrinkled. “Who?”

Sam raised his eyebrows and indicated with a quick dart of his eyes the figure standing across the room, ever present and watchful.

“C'mon. No way.” He shook his head and threw a few more punches, trying to focus back on his form and not the rock-steady brace of Sam's thick thighs as he held the bag for him.

“*You* come on,” said Sam. “I'm serious. Look, after your last fight? You should really think about getting a new trainer, a real one. This business is hard enough trying to make it work with all the contracts and negotiations without getting dragged down by something as avoidable as a bad team behind the scenes.”

Johnny shifted out of his stance, a little uncomfortable. “Since when do you care about all that money crap?” he asked.

Sam was always reading some book or another on philosophy and technique, or the history of martial arts. If he wasn't so built, Johnny might call him a nerd; if Johnny was more sure of himself, he might call him it anyway but in the right teasing tone.

“Since I live in reality and reality comes with bills,” said Sam. He let go of the bag. “Hey, I know you still live with your parents, so you're not really thinking about this stuff yet—”

“I think about that stuff,” said Johnny quickly. He didn't want Sam thinking he was some kind of kid still; he was almost twenty, after all.

“You're too good a fighter to still be training with your childhood karate teacher,” said Sam bluntly.

Johnny said nothing. He turned his attention to the peeling tape around his wrist. He frowned and tried to stretch it back into place,

make it stick.

“Don't get me wrong, I think it's really great you've been so loyal to him. It's – it's kinda sweet.”

His eyes flew up and Sam met them steadily. Johnny's cheeks warmed.

Sam's mouth twitched into a pleased smile before he glanced around the room casually. “Look, I'm just saying – you said the PKA was talking about some overseas fights, right? That's serious stuff, Johnny. You want to find some people who know how to navigate it, look out for your best interests.”

“Sensei Kreese does, he always has,” said Johnny, giving up on the tape. He glanced around the room, caught the eye of Kreese; nodded at him, because yeah, he's going to get back to work any second now.

“And I'm not sweet,” he added, low and insistent. He regretted it almost immediately, because Sam actually laughed then.

“Yeah. Sure, kid. You're super scary and intimidating.”

“Hey, I can take you, can't I?”

Sam smiled again and shrugged easily. “Yeah, you can.” He paused, eyes dropping. “Anytime, in fact. Just name the place.”

Johnny swallowed, eyes darting away and back, a little disbelieving. He must be reading this wrong. This kind of thing didn't happen to him. Not out in the open like this, and not with anyone he actually knew and liked.

Sam grew serious as he took hold of the heavy bag again. “Just think about what I said. Your teacher got you this far, but at some point, you need to start thinking about your future. What you want it to look like. There's more to work on than just your punching.”

“But I'm *really* good at punching,” said Johnny, hoping for another smile.

He was rewarded immediately with one that was amused and a little exasperated and secretly maybe fond.

“Yeah, okay,” allowed Sam. “You are really good at punching.”

There's an inhuman sound in his ears and in his throat, and the thing below his fist becomes more inhuman with every passing second.

He once got very good at delivering knock-out punches; for the obvious reasons, he has never had to deliver more than one in a row before. But here's how it goes: one to stun and two to lay out. Three goes the septum but why stop there. His hand isn't meant for anything else. Kreese made sure of that.

Swift tapping shoes fly in from the periphery and a pair of strong arms catch him around the chest, pulling him back. *John, John* in his ear; Robert, how? Blood smears along his knuckles as his arm is snatched back into the air, and Robert hauls him up – the room swings in his view like its contents are bobbing along in the wake of an enormous, cataclysmic wave: Chozen standing in front of an unmoving, watchful Silver and Susan hiding her face in Ali's neck – Ali, white-faced and frozen and Daniel, Daniel. Daniel sliding forward across the floor, skidding hard on his knees. Hands fumbling along the bloodied face of the body on the ground, fingers seeking out the neck. Johnny doesn't understand why until he sits back on his heels a moment later and announces with relief to the room:

“He's alive.”

Chapter 77: ...

Silver sets his glass down on the drinks cart and steps forward; Chozen doesn't move out of his way. After a long moment of unimpressed scrutiny, Silver lets his eyes drift upward and he calls out:

“Jacobs.”

“Um.” There is a muffled curse and a cleared throat and some shuffling. A cracked door swings open on the other side of the room, and a uniformed servant leans through the space. He doesn't look anywhere but at Silver as he says nervously, “Jacobs quit, Mr Silver.”

Mild surprise fills his face. “Jacobs quit? When?” He waves the question away. “Never mind – call the doctor. Tell him I need him to make a house call, somewhat urgent.”

The servant disappears with a palpable impression of relief and Silver turns back to Chozen, sidling around him with a polite, *may I? Thank you.*

Robert's still talking at Johnny: talking, always talking. Does he never get tired of it? Does he never just want to give up? Why is he still trying. There's nothing to save here.

“—and I'll be right behind you all the way to the station. You just need to sit tight, say nothing while you're being processed. I'll be with you for everything important – John. *John.*”

He means to nod, but Daniel is still looking at him and he can't seem to move.

“Johnny, can you at least nod to show you're listening?”

“You can cool it with the legal advice,” says Silver. “It won't be necessary. No one will be calling the police.”

He sinks gracefully to kneel beside Kreese, and Daniel twitches like he wants to startle back. He remains where he is but takes his hands away as Silver reaches out to cradle Kreese's head carefully.

“The man's *unconscious*,” says Robert.

“He's had worse,” says Silver, almost wistful. He turns Kreese's face towards him for inspection, lashes falling as his eyes take in the

damage. “We won't be pressing charges.”

“We,” echoes Daniel, finally finding his voice. He shifts on his knees in agitation. “Who's *we*, how's that your call? Who the hell are you?”

“Me?” He smiles at Daniel over the body. “I'm nobody. How about you?”

“C'mon,” says Robert, taking hold of Johnny's elbow again. “Let's go. C'mon.”

He doesn't want to move at first. Some kind of prey instinct; if he moves, it will attract attention, and then it'll all be over. But Robert is insistent and there's nothing left to do here.

He wills himself to step back, and sure enough, the movement draws notice – Daniel tears his eyes away from Silver and Kreese and looks again at Johnny.

His eyes find his fist first. Maybe they always will. Johnny turns away before he has to watch the rest of it take shape.

As they pass, Chozen reaches out and presses a hand to his shoulder, squeezing hard. Johnny meets his eyes for only a second, long enough for Chozen to nod. His eyes maybe communicate something, but he can't read it. Everything is very distant and feels like it's covered in a dropcloth, like the whole world has been put away for long term storage.

Susan doesn't quite look at him as they leave the room. Ali does, and that's worse.

Chapter 78: ...

They can't be more than a minute behind Johnny and Bobby, but when they leave the house the BMW is already gone. Johnny is gone. Daniel stands dumbly in the middle of the street, looking in the direction they'd all come from, the city in the distance. He doesn't know what to feel.

Susan is too shook up to drive. He is about to take over but Ali beats him to it, leaving him with nothing to occupy his hands or attention. He sits behind the driver's seat and says nothing. Nobody else says anything either, so it's pretty quiet on the ride back to the house. Once, he accidentally meets Ali's eyes in the rearview mirror. He half expects to read blame there, but all he sees is a reflection of his own arid weariness. She knew Johnny too, that's right.

After an eternity or maybe only half an hour, Ali pulls the Saab over to the curb in front of the house. She doesn't turn off the car, but hesitates and looks over at Susan.

“Do you maybe want to come stay with me tonight? I have tomorrow off and—”

“Yeah, sure,” says Susan quickly. She sounds almost normal, but the glimpse Daniel gets of the side of her face shows reddened eyes. She tries a smile. “I mean, why not? Not like I have to go to work tomorrow, right?”

Daniel leans forward too fast and gets clotheslined by his seatbelt. “Wait, you got *fired*?”

Susan gives him a watery glare over her shoulder. “I *quit*.”

His mouth wavers open but he finds he has nothing to say to this earth-shifting news. He glances at Chozen, who only shrugs impatiently and gets out of the car. Through his door's unobstructed window, Daniel's eyes snag on Johnny's bike, sitting parked in the drive.

He left his car by the dojo, he remembers distantly. That's right.

“Are you going to be okay?” Ali asks him, and he looks around to find both women eyeing him from the front.

“You could come too,” offers Susan. “It could be like old times. We'll put makeup on you and I'll pretend I want to talk about boys, and you can pretend you don't want to talk about them.”

Daniel's eyebrows twitch up in surprise, and he automatically checks with Ali, but it's been a long day and somehow he's forgot – she knows about Susan now, that's right.

He says, “Thanks, but I'll have to take a rain check on that. I think I should – I want to be here.” In case he comes back? He doesn't know.

Susan and Ali exchange a look. “You sure?” asks Ali, neutral.

He makes a complicated face and shrugs, and her mouth twists to the side a little like, yeah. They're all dithering like they just got back from a funeral, and Daniel kind of hates it.

“He was so angry,” says Susan suddenly. She glances between them, looking oddly embarrassed. “I guess I forgot what that looked like, when he gets angry. It never seemed like that big a deal back in school.”

Had he been angry? wonders Daniel. He'd looked sad to him – sad and desperate and terribly scared.

“What happened before we got there?” he asks Susan. “What did Kreese do?”

Her face twists in frustration. “...Nothing, really? Sounded like he wasn't actually helping Johnny for that big tournament in the fall.” Her eyes widen. “Oh and he and that other guy are definitely having sex.”

Daniel pauses. “For real?” Because Susan is the type of gay who thinks everyone else is too. She thinks Tom Cruise is gay and probably only because he's short; she says Daniel has complex about his height and refuses to argue about it anymore.

She looks at him like she knows what he's thinking and is already holding it against him. “Like Sid and Nancy, I'm *telling* you.”

Unexpectedly, Ali joins in, shifting a little over her seat and saying, “He um, he did have a kind of – tenderness? To him.”

Daniel would rather not think about the disturbing look of appreciation in that Silver guy's eyes as he held Kreese's bloody face.

Ever again, actually. Jeez. He rubs his face and looks forward out the windshield.

After a moment, he squints. “Is that Chozen's car?”

After the girls have left, Daniel goes inside the house and picks a fight with Chozen.

He doesn't mean to, it's only there's no one else around. He finds Chozen in the bedroom packing his bag, and it feels like the man's running away from a mess. Running away like he's done for the past seven years.

“Where you going?” asks Daniel, leaning in the doorway. “I saw your car outside – you actually get a license to drive that thing, or are you still playing fast and loose with the law? You know there's a limit to what your agent can get you out of, right? Especially if you continue to piss her off by avoiding her all the time. And it's not like your uncle's in charge around here, he can't do anything if you get in trouble—”

Chozen closes his bag with enough force to strain the seams of the zipper and turns to him. “You are angry. Do you want to fight.”

“Do I—” Daniel cuts himself off with an incredulous laugh. “We just watched a man get his face rearranged, so no. No, I don't want to fucking fight.”

He makes a terse cutting gesture with his arm and picks the bag up off the bed. “Then don't waste my time.”

He knocks him into the door frame as he walks out of the room. Daniel bites his tongue and hauls in a breath and pushes off to follow him down the hallway.

“You know you could have stopped Johnny,” he says to those tight shoulders. “This whole mess, it didn't – you could have stopped him. So why didn't you fucking stop him?”

Chozen looks back at him, and he doesn't even look angry, which only makes Daniel angrier. Surely, if Chozen really cared about anything or anyone, he'd be upset right now. He wouldn't be able to just *walk away*.

“Was his fight,” says Chozen. “His decision.”

“Sure, and now he has to live with it.”

“I would've hurt Kumiko if you didn't stop me,” he says simply. “Does not make me any different than the boy who was not stopped."

“I think Kumiko probably has a preference there,” says Daniel, but the scornful venom is already seeping out of his tone. They don't talk about Kumiko.

Chozen's hand flexes around the leather straps of his bag. “That man is not Kumiko. He deserved it.”

Deserve; he hates the word. Who decides that, and do they even understand what they're talking about? Maybe you do something because someone else deserves it, but it's not a one-way act that changes the other person and leaves you intact. Suddenly it doesn't matter what you intended or what a lifetime of thoughts add up to, you're a different person. You can never go back. Try and it always feels a little like a mask.

“And what did I deserve?” Daniel asks him.

Chozen's brow lowers, his mouth flattens – he finally looks angry.

Daniel watches him stalk to the door, words pushing at the back of his teeth but what's the point in any of them, there's nothing else to say. Chozen opens the door and pauses, looking back, the evening sunlight casting half his face in shadow and rendering his expression unreadable.

Daniel waits.

Ultimately Chozen doesn't say anything. He just leaves, shutting the door after himself and taking the light in the room with him.

After a while, Daniel moves. He walks through the living room and around the corner slow and heavy like he's older than Mr Miyagi. He pulls out a chair from the dining table and slumps down. Spends a while looking over at the kitchen at the new window, which is beautiful and will likely look even more so in the morning light. He begins to feel incalculably worse.

There's a fat black rolodex sitting on the table, which he pokes and flips through with blank incuriosity. Eventually he notices the note

sitting behind it on the other side of the table. He leans forward and extends his arm, gets two fingers on the piece of paper and drags it around to take a look. His hand goes limp, flattening against the note.

DANIEL—
might be late for dinner, taking care of some stuff.
tell you about it later.
-J

His mouth works. He listens to the silence of the house as the room grows darker, and his sinuses start to burn. Finally, with mercy, the words beneath his fingers blur into nothing.

Chapter 79: ...

Robert doesn't ask him where he wants to go, which is just as well because the answer is nowhere.

They cut west on the 101, the sun just low enough in the sky to render the car's visors useless and turn the road into a blinding river of gold. Johnny holds his eyes in a faint squint and turns his head but it doesn't help much; the light is a physical, battering force.

Robert is still talking, somehow. He fills the car with it: that lawyerly instinct to reorder the world with procedures and arguments. “I'll check in, keep on eye on Kreese's condition,” he says. “I don't know who that man was, or what his deal is, but obviously I don't think we should just take his word that this is over.”

“Said he's the owner of Cobra Kai,” says Johnny.

It never really occurred to him how little he knew about his sensei. He'd never even been curious. Why was that? Cowardice? Or maybe desperation: a pathetic desire to be deemed good enough by someone, maybe anyone. Is that better or worse than believing it had to be Kreese? But what difference does it make now.

“You see the way they looked at me,” he says, and too late he realizes he has interrupted Robert, who was still, of course, talking.

He falls silent now, however, and glances between the road and Johnny, expression worried. Eventually he sighs and smoothes his hair back needlessly from his forehead, thumb rubbing his high widow's peak.

“Yeah, well – that kind of thing can be pretty alarming to people who aren't used to it,” is what he says finally.

Johnny turns his head against the seat to watch the passing treeline visible over the tall barrier of the highway. “Think I'll end up like Dutch?” He hasn't been to visit him in prison, but from what Tommy said, it's only made Dutch more Dutch. He wonders what it would do to him.

“That's not going to happen,” he says firmly.

“...Maybe it should.” Johnny puts his arm up on the side of the door

and jams his fist against his mouth; his knuckles are tender and a little swollen. A good reminder. As if he'll ever forget now. “Maybe it's what I deserve.”

One glimpse of Daniel's gutted expression was all it took to snap Johnny back to reality: the real world he's managed to hide from for the past few weeks.

What did he think was going to happen, stumbling out of his crap life and into the other man's bed. Invasive, contaminating. Daniel clearly had some kind of instinct about Johnny, but he must've hoped for better anyway, the way he always does. Side effect of being a know-it-all. But nothing ever changes, not really; Johnny never has. It was stupid to think he could play house and suddenly become someone worth having.

“John, listen to me,” says Robert, intent and rapid. “This world is not built to give people what they deserve, and the criminal justice system even less so. This is not about *deserve*.”

He notices he didn't deny it. “And what's it about?” he asks dully.

If he went to jail, at least he wouldn't have any choice to make; he wouldn't have to think about tomorrow, and the next day, and the next.

“It's, it's about – one mistake should not determine the rest of a person's life,” says Robert, insistent; Johnny wonders what he'd think if he knew what John had done in the gym and that shithole apartment. There has to be a line somewhere with Robert, even for old school buddies. “It doesn't define you – what happened with Kreese, it could have just as easily been me.”

“It was never going to be you.” And he thinks they both know why.

Robert checks his mirrors and taps his turn signal, takes the exit. His hands are smooth on the wheel but the way his head and eyes move betrays his frustration.

“Look, John – even if I thought you were the worst person on the planet, even if I thought you were a monster, I'd still say we fight this. Talk about deserve, everyone deserves a fighting chance at defending himself. Because the actions of any one individual have to be weighed against the power of the State. The State in its essence will always push to make us think those are unlimited. But they're not.”

Oh fuck, thinks Johnny distantly; he's turning this into a principle thing.

Other people turn to drink or junk food when they're feeling boxed in by life, but not Robert Brown. There always has to be some system to blame, to fight or work with. He can't ever just let life be life, or people be people. There's always some shining image sitting out there, just out of reach for everyone to live up to.

Robert clears his throat a little and adds, a trace of self-consciousness making him quiet, “The only person who can really judge you is God.”

“Oh jesus, Bobby,” he says involuntarily, dropping his fist to stare across the car. “You really think I'm going to fare any better with *him*?”

They arrive and the unstoppable force of positivity that is Ashley Brown is almost a relief to contend with, because it means John can mostly go on auto-pilot.

Ashley is glad to see John; it's been a while, what, doesn't he like them? Just kidding, she knows he's always so busy with work. Oh, he no longer works at Aalders & Bray? Well, it's great he's making a change. It takes a lot of bravery to do that.

Ashley is concerned about his bruises; oh, it's a karate thing? You boys. Robert has told her *all about* the karate thing. You know, back in her hometown, everybody was really into football. The valley is such a funny place.

Ashley is making supper and actually, they don't have a choice about whether they're hungry or not, she has spent the past two hours working on the bird that's in the oven. Sound good? Great!

Ashley is delighted John is staying the night; stay as long he wants! This big house can feel a little empty sometimes, don't you think, Robert? Oh, look at her, John, dropping these little hints – she thinks Robert should take some time off work. Of course, she just wants more time with him, who wouldn't? But also, they've been married a couple years now, and it's getting to be that time... you know? Don't want to start too late, Robert's going to be thirty soon enough, and it's not like he's going to get any less busy.

Ashley is asking, beer?

Ashley is so curious: how goes the love life, John? Meet anyone lately? You know, being a bachelor may seem fun now, but she's sure it gets lonely. Wouldn't it be great to bring a girlfriend over one of these times. They could all go out on double dates, it'd be fun.

“I'm gay,” says Johnny.

Ashley is gratifyingly surprised; oh, that's new!

“Not really.”

Ashley is shaking her head at her husband. He always forgets to tell her these things. So: gay, huh? That's so interesting, how cosmopolitan. Does he have a, a, a boyfriend?

“Sorry – you'll have to excuse me, it's been a really long day. Think I'm more tired than I realized.”

Ashley is worried she has misspoke. She hopes she didn't offend him. Did she offend him?

“Don't worry about it, Ash,” says Robert. “Nothing you said, it's just been a rough day for him. So, how's that duck looking? Smells great.”

The guestroom is twice the size of Daniel's bedroom and tastefully appointed like a high end hotel room: dark carpet and cream walls and a large ensuite bathroom with thick white towels perfectly folded beside a pristine sink and mirror beneath warm golden lights that make even his bruises look less ugly.

Johnny slowly strips down to his boxers and undershirt, taking care as he slides the suit onto hangers. He smooths the garments down before placing the hangers back in the closet. He sinks onto the edge of the bed; the plush, king-sized mattress takes his weight and gives back nothing.

The scenery doesn't really touch him; the only thing that feels real is his body, and you'd think he'd finally have learned this by now: he could be anywhere and it wouldn't make a difference.

He rubs his palms over his bare knees and looks down at his knuckles.

He flexes his hand, testing; it and his arms are stiffening up a little. He hadn't stretched or warmed up before heading out this morning. He guesses it doesn't really matter anymore. He won't be training tomorrow.

He lets himself fall backwards, extending his arms out from his sides. The flat pale blue expanse of the bed stretches out all around him, endless and empty and kind of cold because the Browns keep their air conditioning set pretty low.

He listens to his body as his pulse slows. He gazes at the white ceiling and waits for the moment he won't hear anything at all.

Chapter 80: The Face of a Thousand Heroes

Why does anyone attend their high school reunion?
A survey from a month before the start of our story.

Marty

It takes her a few seconds to realize the poindexter with the fumbling grip around his drink thinks she actually went to school here. The realization is accompanied with a sickening jolt, a stark sense of displacement: how could anyone look at her and think she belonged in this place?

Susan swore her high school was “normal, *so* normal” and “full of all kinds of people, really” but to Marty's eyes it just looks like the rest of Southern California. What does a high school need a *courtyard* for? Are they worried their tans will fade if they stay indoors too long?

The pressure out here to smile and relax is so messed up. Just once, she'd like to meet someone in LA as unhappy as she is.

“I didn't go here,” she tells the guy, and then the bartender extends Susan's fancy cocktail across the bar towards her. She accepts it with gruff gratitude.

(Okay, so screw rich people, but at least there are some perks. She didn't go to her own high school reunion, but she's pretty sure their “bar” consisted of ten cases of Rolling Rock and a tip jar which was probably stolen before the end of the night.)

The man doesn't shove his glasses up his nose, but it's clearly a near thing. “Oh? Really? Are you – I thought—”

“I'm from Pittsburgh.” Close enough; no one here would know it. Hell, probably no one in Pittsburgh knows it.

He grows confused. “So, um, are you here with someone?”

Great question; she rewards him by slapping his shoulder and tipping her beer and stepping away to find that someone. “Catch you later,

'Allen'." Because that's what his name tag says.

As she traverses the courtyard with the drinks in hand, she looks around at the clumps of people standing beneath the criss-crossed lines of little yellow fairy lights someone strung up for the occasion.

She bets this was the kind of school they show in all the movies. The grouping of people probably means something – echoes of old cliques? She wonders how they feel sitting with the realization they all basically look the same now: ten pounds heavier and caught in varying stages of the American nuclear family death cycle.

"—you even come?" Susan is saying when Marty arrives back at her side. She glances at her and smiles as she accepts the drink, and then the smile redirects and blooms because other people have arrived, also.

"You *told* me to come!" says Daniel, indignant. "You left me like ten goddamn messages of an increasingly threatening nature."

Two blondes step in, both made up like they're at the fucking opera or something. After a second, Marty is chagrined to recognize them from photos Susan keeps on her fridge and dresser and bedroom wall. So this is them. She wonders if Susan every felt like the odd girl out in school, flanked by all that blonde hair.

"I hear Josh Mackey is looking for you," the prim, taller one says to Daniel.

He frowns. "Who?"

"Well, what do you think," drawls Susan, gesturing for the women's sake at the courtyard and company. "Is it like you remember and dream about?"

"Are they really getting rid of the courtyard?" asks the tall one, looking around. "Seems a shame, after they've made such progress with the air quality in the valley."

The other says, "Haven't you seen the design pictures for the remodel? They're just moving it. It's going to be on the west side now."

"How would you even know that?" wonders Susan.

Marty shifts on her feet and takes a sip of her beer; the tall one glances at her curiously. She flicks a close-mouthed smile out like it's a

butterfly knife, and the woman looks away again.

“My parents told me. And speaking of – imagine my surprise when they also told me you two were dating now.”

“Uh,” says Daniel. His eyes dart wide and obvious at Marty. Has anyone ever been more hopelessly a twerp.

“Oh my god, *congratulations*!” says the tall and apparently dumb one. “I knew it, I *always* knew it.”

“Babs, you know nothing,” says Susan with flat disgust.

She still hasn't looked at Marty. It's like even acknowledging her presence is somehow incriminating, like if she meets her eyes for a single second she'll be transported back to the last time Marty was making her keen and sob while her knees were flung over her shoulders.

Fuck, this whole thing was such a mistake. She knew it. She always knows it but she never wants to believe.

“I told my parents that so they'd get off my back,” Susan continues. “They've taken to using me as their newest piece of artillery in the divorce, and – I'd rather just not, okay. So I fed them a story about Daniel. They're horrified.”

“Right, because I'm such a terrible prospect,” mutters Daniel and louder: “You know, plenty of parents would be *thrilled* to have me dating their kid? I own a small business, a house.”

“And two eyes, and just the one nose, and a complete set of fingers,” relays Susan with sparkling enthusiasm; he scowls at her.

Babs twists her mouth to the side, awkward. “Isn't lying about that kind of thing at our age a little immature?”

“Oh my god, get off my back!” exclaims Susan, and that's when the other one finally notices Marty.

“Hi,” she says, and to her credit, she extends a hand. “I'm Ali. Are you – ?”

“A friend of Sue's,” says Marty, who knows her job. She shakes her hand firmly. “Night was going slow, and she was complaining, so I thought I'd tag along. Name's,” and she almost says it before

remembering Susan's plea from earlier; she is able to make the save and say with only a little pain, “Anne. Anne Martindale.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Anne.”

But then Ali and Barbara *really* look at her, eyes moving quick and taking in all there is to take, which admittedly isn't much by this place's standards: her jeans and old Hall & Oates shirt, her short hair – her face, unadorned.

They smile politely. They wait.

“We met through work,” offers Susan and jesus. Here she always thought the girl good at lying.

“And are you from around here too, Anne?” asks Barb.

“Clairton, Pennsylvania,” announces Daniel before she can answer, and honestly, *who the fuck asked him?*

“Oh, where's that?”

Marty looks away from staring hard at Daniel's baffled face and smiles tightly at the two women. “It's practically Pittsburgh,” she says.

She tells many lies that night and throughout her life, but that will always be the first one.

Barbara

It's a rare night she can get away from the kids. She hasn't seen Ali in three months and Susan has been her typical flakey self forever; Daniel she manages to see for drinks maybe once a month and he's always game to talk on the phone, but it's just not the same as being with them all together again in the same room. So never mind Susan's weird, stuck up friend – Barbara is determined to enjoy herself.

“Who are you looking for?” asks Ali, after catching her craning her head for the fifth time.

“Oh, nobody,” she says vaguely.

She wonders if Alexander has come, and what he looks like these days, what he's done with himself. Innocent curiosity, of course; she is

quite contentedly married. And even if she wasn't, the prospect of scheduling an affair around the kids' after-school activities is too inconvenient to even contemplate. But Alexander was her first boyfriend if you don't count Kurt Winters in the ninth grade (she doesn't and neither should anyone else). He is a very safe person to daydream about.

She hopes his smile is the same.

“So how's it feel, being back after ten years?” asks Anne, in that same blunt, abrupt way she seems to say everything.

“Nine,” says Ali.

Anne frowns like she thinks she's messing with her. “What?”

“It's actually only been nine years,” she explains. “But the school was damaged in the earthquake, so they're remodeling it.”

Anne shakes her head, not getting the significance.

Susan gives a quarter turn and says to her, low, “Trust me you don't want to hear this. It's stupid.”

“No,” she insists without looking at her; she gestures at Ali with the hand holding her beer bottle. “I want to know.”

Barbara decides to help. She has been dying to tell this story anyway.

“Okay! So Tricia Strassler – class president,” she explains, “also head of the yearbook committee. She organized the reunion organizing committee, and headed up the scheduling and budget subcommittees – anyway, *apparently* she always planned to take a reunion photo against the mural wall over there,” and she points helpfully over Anne's shoulder, but Anne doesn't look around. Okay, whatever. Like, it's a piece of West Valley High history, but – whatever. “It's supposed to match the original class photo from our senior year.”

“It wasn't the original class photo,” Daniel puts in. “Our official class photo was taken on the bleachers in the gym, with all the other grades. The mural photo was a smug, exclusionary stunt—”

“It must've been *so* hard, being unpopular,” Susan raps out mercilessly. She looks at Ali sidelong. “Remember that day? Tricia made us do like ten takes.”

“I didn't go,” says Ali. “I thought the whole thing was silly and mean-spirited.”

Susan rolls her eyes. “Oh, that's right – Babs, remember how many takes we had to do?”

“It was a little excessive,” she admits. Not wanting to leave Anne in a conversational lurch, she turns to her and continues, “So then with the quake and the announcement of the remodel, Tricia proposed we moved the reunion up a year, so we could all see the old place one last time and also get that photo taken.”

“They tracked down and contacted everyone in the grade to meet a year early because some chick wanted a photo,” says Anne.

“Not just some chick,” says Barbara, a little flustered, because clearly she doesn't get it. “Tricia Strassler.”

Anne looks around at the others like now she thinks *Barbara* is trying to mess with her. Susan shakes her head. Daniel widens his eyes and puts them elsewhere and downs his wine.

“No, no, you don't understand,” insists Barbara, distressed. She doesn't want anyone thinking this was a simple matter of high school popularity. This was about raw power.

“That woman moved the site and time of the scheduling subcommittee meeting *three times*. She arranged to have a quorum stuffed with her supporters. She subverted Robert's Rules.” She looks at Ali for back-up, but Ali only smiles patiently at her: hopelessly above it all, as always. “I'm just saying, we were always going to have the ten-year reunion nine years out. Unless Tricia wanted it eleven years out, then we were always going to have it then. Do you see?”

“Move over, Big Brother,” says Daniel, and he polishes off his second glass of wine and resumes looking around the courtyard.

“Who are you looking for?” asks Ali.

“Oh, nobody,” he says vaguely.

Ali

Susan and Anne disappear to use the restroom, and Barbara catches sight of someone across the courtyard and bounces thrice on her tip-toes, flapping her fingers in the air and giving an excited squeal before dashing away. In the leftover space, she and Daniel sidle closer, shoulders hinging together like a set of double-sided doors. They look out at the crowd.

“I don't even know why I came here tonight,” says Daniel after a moment. “This isn't even *really* my school. I attended East Side High back in Newark for three years, this place just the one. That's the ten year reunion I should be going to.”

“Well, good news is, you still can,” she says dryly. “Since we won't be holding ours next year.”

“Yeah, right. Like I want to go all the way to Jersey just to see which of my old classmates got locked up or went bald in the past ten years.”

She decides to change the subject. “So, you know Anne, right? You've met her before?”

Daniel takes an inordinately large gulp of his wine. He used to be a better card player than this, or maybe she just didn't know him as well back then. She raises her eyebrows and waits.

She swears Anne kind of glares at her every time she speaks. It's starting to make her uncomfortable. Actually, everything about her is making Ali uncomfortable: the way she stands so close to Susan but says almost nothing unless it's to reference something only the two of them know, the way she watches Susan constantly when she's not looking. Once, she touched Susan's arm and Susan jerked away like she'd been burned. Ali doesn't know what's going on, but she can't stop thinking about it: something about those rough, blunt-tipped fingers around Susan's slender forearm.

“Once or twice,” he says finally. “I wouldn't say I know her that well, really.” He clears his throat and says, “Hey – looks like those assholes have finally arrived. Was wondering when they'd show their faces.”

“Who?” She looks around and spots Robert and Tom. “Oh, god – please, Daniel, don't even start with them. I came here to have a nice, low-key night with the girls.”

He looks at her, oh-*so*-surprised like he has never caused a scene in his life: like he wasn't the same boy who'd tried crowd-surfing after walking across the stage to get his diploma (Babs tried so hard for him

but she was hardly a one-girl army; Ali will never forget the look on Susan's face as she stared down at them sprawled at her feet in a puddle of dark nylon gowns).

“What?” says Daniel. “I'm not gonna do anything. I'm not even going to try talking to them, that's how much I'm not doing anything.” But his eyes slide off her face and back across the room. “Anyway, it doesn't look like. You know.” He shuffles his feet. “He's not even with them.”

She glances over to confirm. “No, guess he isn't.” A moment later one plus one equals trouble, and she gives him a disbelieving look. “Is that why you came tonight?”

“No,” he says, stung. “It's like you said. I want a nice, low-key night with the girls too.”

“How *is* the love life going, by the way?” she asks, because recently it seems like he has been kind of going through the whole phonebook. She can't remember when she last saw him with the same person twice.

“Swell,” he says, rocking back on his feet and nodding. “It's going great. How's Greg? I notice you didn't bring him along. What's wrong, didn't want him to feel like a piece of arm candy?”

“Greg would love to be a piece of arm candy,” she replies, because it's true; she tends to somehow find men who do. “I told you, I wanted it to just be you guys tonight.” Though apparently Susan didn't feel the same way; where did she go?

“You aren't wearing your engagement ring,” he observes and when she gives him a look: “What? C'mon, it's kind of hard not to notice, that thing is *huge*.”

“I didn't come here to show off some rock on my finger. It's no one's business.”

“Your problem is you never want to brag about anything,” he says, reflective. “That's why it never would've worked between you and me, you know. If *I*'d gotten you that ring, I tell you, we'd be doing the rounds right now.” She rolls her eyes, and he warms up to the topic, expression opening as he begins to enjoy himself and is also perhaps starting to feel the effects of the wine. “I'm serious, I would've been tacky as hell about it – I'd make sure everyone knew you'd said yes to me. I'd elbow the DJ over, take the microphone – arrange it so all the

lights shine on you at the right time – cue the drum roll—"

"*No*," she says, horrified but laughing a little.

"Oh yes. I'd want the whole world to know."

He waves an arm with elaborate flourish, like The Whole World could still be encompassed by a couple hundred former classmates. The simplicity of the idea is almost tempting.

Also tempting: Daniel, who for a moment looks exactly like the beautiful, charming boy from back then. Ali feels an unwelcome surge of longing, the old feelings that never fully went away and probably never would, but which she long ago decided to put aside, just like he had put his aside.

"I have to say," she says, measured, "that sounds incredibly over-the-top and embarrassing."

His shoulder lifts in an easy shrug, amiable; his dark eyes sweep over hers in rueful acknowledgement, sharply knowing and aware of the thing between them, before falling away again.

"Just as well it didn't work out, huh?" he says lightly.

"Guess so."

They fall silent and spend a minute looking again around the courtyard at all the people. Barbara doesn't seem like she's coming back over anytime soon, and Susan (and Anne) have yet to reappear. The rest of the crowd reads to Ali almost like a watercolor, faces flashing almost-familiar before receding again to a distance.

You sure you don't want me to come? Not every day someone goes to their ninth-year reunion, Greg had said earlier.

Trust me – I don't even want to go. But I need to talk to Susan, and this is the one place I know she won't dodge me.

Or so she'd thought. Ali unfolds and refolds her arms and tries to shake off this ridiculous melancholy. She refuses to get sad at this thing; for one, other people would absolutely misread it.

"You know, it's good you didn't go to that school back in Newark," she says, and at her side Daniel stirs, pensive expression melting away as he meets her eyes again. "For what it's worth. I'm glad we got you for

one year."

Daniel's lashes sweep in a surprised blink, and then he smiles at her, warm and sweet as ever.

Robert

"Alright!" says Tom, shouldering through the garland-strewn entrance to survey the crowded courtyard. He puts his hands in the pockets of his slacks and narrows his eyes, nodding. "Let's rock this."

Robert stops walking because Ash is having some trouble with the strap of her heel and needs to lean on him a moment. He sweeps the area with a quick look and checks his watch. Two hours, max, then they're leaving, regardless of what Ash says about the importance of memories and keeping in contact with old friends.

"I'm getting a drink," announces Tom after he's gotten the lay of the land.

"I'll take white wine," says Jen, glancing up from where she's been rifling through her clutch.

Tom waves her off and makes a beeline for the bar, leaving Robert to smile and engage Jen in conversation so she doesn't turn sour right off the bat. With one last hop and a little breath of relief, Ash finishes fixing her shoe and turns to help out, conversation instantly flowing from her mouth bright and easy. He squeezes her waist in subtle thanks.

A few minutes later, something pulls at his knee, and Robert looks down to meet the wide, intent hazel eyes of a tow-headed toddler.

"Who are you?" he asks blankly.

In response, a bubble of spit forms at the boy's mouth. Under Robert's deeply consternated gaze, which quickly turns into a frown, the bubble starts to grow. It gets perilously close to the knee of his trousers. Robert badly wants to move his leg, but the boy still has his fist latched onto the fabric; he's pretty sure you're not supposed to shake a child off of your leg like you would a misbehaving dog.

"Tyler!" A man rushes up, arms outstretched to snatch the boy up

from the floor. “I told you, you can't go running off like that when Daddy's talking to someone.”

“*Jimmy*?” says Robert, and the man looks around at him in surprise before a wide grin bursts across his face in recognition.

“Bobby! Oh, man, what an introduction – god, look at you, you look so *sharp*, I feel underdressed—”

“You look fine,” he says, and he means it; Jimmy has gained at least twenty pounds and almost radiates cheer in his short-sleeved plaid shirt and khaki shorts. He looks like a man who owns a minivan and is maybe even happy about it. His entire presence is somehow alien.

He is a complete stranger, Robert realizes. You'd never know by looking at them now they had once been the same.

“Oh my, and who is *this?*” says Ashley, abandoning Jen Duty in favor of descending upon the child. She spares a bright smile for Jimmy. “Hi, I'm Ashley, by the way – Robert's wife, I think I remember you at the wedding, right?”

Jimmy hitches the boy up along his side and beams at her. “Yes, indeedy, and might I say, you're looking lovely as ever? As for this rascal – this is my son Tyler. Tyler, tell Ashley how old you are.”

The boy's eyes wander from face to face. His word formulation is clumsy and his deployment, slow. Ash reacts like he has just repeated Einstein's equation of mass-energy equivalence. Robert smiles patiently through it.

Jimmy's wife Kayla catches up with them a minute later, balancing a baby with a bag of supplies, and now even Jen falls into line. Suddenly Robert finds himself amid a rapid crossfire of testimonies, everyone summing up their entire lives at the top of their lungs, and where the hell is Tom when you need someone normal to communicate with, and for that matter, where the hell is *John.*

“Oh, the second is actually so much easier than the first,” Jimmy tells Ash, who has managed to take possession of Tyler and is now lifting him in the air and making noises of ecstasy.

“The second is easier, he says,” says Jimmy's wife to Jen, tone wry. “Easy for him to say, right?”

Robert checks his watch again. An hour and forty-five minutes, and

then he can go home and get back to the blessedly quiet, legible lines of work.

Susan

Marty twists her wrist and Susan's knees tremble and jump, and she cracks her head back against the tile of the bathroom. Then her sharp gasping turns into a different sort of gasping, and she curls to the side, shrinking away from her, hands coming up to cup her skull.

Behind her, Marty laughs a little and goes *here, let me see*, but when she tries to check her over, her fingers smell of Susan and everything they've been doing and oh god, what the hell was she thinking?

Marty's amusement fades as Susan pushes her away and lets herself out of the handicapped stall. She goes over to the sink – takes in the flush on her face with some despair before twisting her head to the side and prodding the tender spot in the back. She grimaces and curses and bends to wash her hands. She is still feeling hot and shaky from the arousal, but it's not a good feeling like usual, it just makes her feel nervous, sick.

“What's the matter with you?” Marty asks, propping her shoulder against the wall beside the air dryer no one uses, because no one wants to stand around for thirty minutes until their hands are dry.

“Are you kidding?” demands Susan, turning to rip out a handful of paper towels. “You know, maybe some people want to show up at their old high school just to fuck around, but not me! I do not find this place remotely erotic.”

“You seemed to be feeling different about it three minutes ago.”

“Yeah, because you – you dragged me in here,” she hisses. “I'm supposed to be out there with the others, not engaging in whatever this was supposed to be – rewriting the glory days in some gross toilet? Whatever.”

“And what's so important about any of those people out there?” asks Marty, stubbornly not getting it.

“They're why I came,” Susan says. “I thought you wanted to meet them. Why did *you* come, if this was going to be your attitude about

it?”

And she doesn't give her a chance to respond, because she knows anything she says will just make her angry, so she whirls and slaps her way out of the bathroom; nearly clocks Lisa Halliway in the face with the door in her hurry. *Hey!* says Lisa, plaintive, and Susan can't even stop to spare an apologetic word, she's so worked up.

There are two men standing at the bar, each doing his very best to pretend the guy at the other end isn't there.

Susan gives Daniel a quick once-over, observing his three-wine flush and the sardonic tilt of his head as he examines her in return with interest. She makes the shrewd decision to banish him henceforth from her social circle and turns her back. To the other man, she declares:

“Tommy, thank god you're here. This thing has been unbelievably lame, and I'm dying of boredom.”

Tom turns to her, eyes already lighting up. He is holding a drink in each hand, and Susan bypasses the white wine to grab the other, something promisingly dark.

“Bored, you say?” says Tom, smirking and sidling closer along the counter as she knocks the glass back. “Well, now, we can't have that.”

Allen

The man is maybe kind of Hispanic? But he isn't Freddy Fernandez or that Esposito kid he had in Algebra 2 and Poli Sci. He has dark eyes and dark hair and tanned skin further warmed by what seems like too much to drink, and he is somehow still talking.

“It's just a little underwhelming, you know – do you find it underwhelming? Like, I don't know, you come here thinking maybe you'll get some answers, and the thing is, most days, you didn't even realize you had questions. So did you really? Or is this whole thing just an exercise in forced self-reflection? Maybe it's not even about anyone else. Maybe we come to this thing and we're all really entering a private little mirrored room in our brain. Right?”

“I'm not sure what you're talking about,” says Allen, glancing around

like someone might save him, but no one will save him. No one ever did back then either.

“Oh, nothing,” sighs the man, propping his chin on his hand. He gives a slight laugh that might sound self-deprecating if it wasn't accompanied by an oddly effete motion brushing his hair back from his eyes. “Just thinking out loud, I suppose.”

Allen smiles nervously and drums his hand over the top of the table.

“I mean, why did *you* come tonight, Allen?” And Allen opens his mouth to respond, but the man continues without giving a sign he's noticed. “It's because we're all curious, and maybe we're even hoping we're doing better than the rest. Like it's some kind of *race*, and isn't that a sad way to look at the world, at other people? Oh man, this is why high school should remain in the past. It just makes us all worse people.”

“I don't think that's—”

“You know, maybe I don't even want to know, right? Last I heard, he seemed like he was doing alright for himself – I mean, it was a while ago, that fight with Gary Pinetti. Did, did you see that, by the way? He had him clean in eight moves. It was – like, this really isn't my thing, understand, but you know – it was impressive. Like, if you're into that.”

“Sorry, who are you talking about now?” asks Allen, finally driven to being direct.

The man stares at him. “Johnny Lawrence,” he says, like it should be obvious.

“Johnny Law – what? Are you kidding?” He swiftly stands up from the table, hands reaching automatically to button his jacket. The man watches him with bewilderment; he has mostly finished his latest glass of red wine, and it has left a faint stain at the corners of his mouth.

Allen says, stiffly apologetic, “Look, I'm sorry, but I don't remember you.”

The man frowns. “*Allen.* What the hell.”

“I mean, Johnny Lawrence? I remember *him*. He was the biggest bully in the school. And I just don't think the two of us could've had much intersection, in terms of social circles. If you were friends with that

guy, I mean."

The man stares at him, lost. "When did I say I was friends with him?"

Abruptly, Allen feels a lot better about himself and where he is in life. Still talking about some guy you weren't even friends with, that's just sad.

Tom

Susan throws her head back and laughs loudly, and Tom enjoys every second of it: the electric weight of her full attention, that thrill of semi-private, them-against-the-world shared humor they've always had. The way her hand drifts over his upper arm.

"Tom," says Robert, arriving at his side.

"Rob," replies Tom, grinning and not looking away from Susan.

Robert turns and quickly asks the bartender for a sangria and a soda, please, and two guesses which one is for him; you'd think the man was in AA with the way he doesn't know how to have fun these days.

"You said you talked to John earlier," he asks Tom. "Well, where is he?"

Tom's grin quiets and he rolls his eyes a little at Susan before turning his head to say over his shoulder, "I said I called him. And I did – left like five messages. But you know him. That guy's impossible to get a hold of these days."

He finally takes notice of the tension in his friend's face and almost groans. Too many work functions have twisted Robert's head around, now the man can't recognize the difference between an obligation and a party.

"Look, would you relax and try to have some fun? You look like you're attending an execution, for god's sake."

Robert says nothing more, just accepts the drinks over the counter and gives him a dark look before turning away again. Past his retreating form, Tom catches Jen's eye. He flashes her a smile and sort of lifts his drink and bobs his head from side-to-side like, *oh you know how it is*

and *I'll be right over, promise.*

Tom shakes his head and turns back to Susan. “You ever get the impression all our friends have forgotten how to have a good time?” he asks her.

Susan looks away from a mannish, slobby woman staring at them from a nearby table. She meets his eyes and laughs again, deliberate and low. She brushes his elbow before taking another drink.

“I know exactly what you mean,” she says.

Daniel

Tricia Strassler starts trying to corral people in front of the mural wall, and something to do with the arrangement of bodies causes a screaming argument to break out between that tool Tommy and a very strident woman who might just be unlucky enough to be his wife, Daniel doesn't know and Daniel doesn't care.

He turns away with a put-upon sigh.

So anyway, he says to the man he has been sitting hunched elbow-to-elbow with for the past twenty minutes. Yeah, okay, maybe he thought he'd see the guy tonight. That's why they all come to these things, right? To see people?

And like, so what. Is that a crime? Give him a break: he works fifty-plus hours a week, and he's got a house that needs about a bajillion things fixed up and who does he come home to? *Nobody*. And you know, with everything he's got going on, some days he literally does not have the energy to fantasize about something new? That's life apparently. Slap in the old trusty tape, play the hits, know what he's saying? Are you going to really judge him for that? Who are you to judge him for that?

“Look, I'm – I'm really not judging. I mean, I get it, I feel like all I do these days is work and sleep,” says the guy. “But hey, listen. I'm glad we bumped into each other – I want to apologize to you.”

Daniel thinks he can stand being apologized to; sometimes he thinks the world should start queueing up, honestly. But all the same, he feels a little guilty here: he doesn't even know the man's name.

Maybe context clues will help; he sits back and gestures graciously for him to continue. And as he starts talking about *making amends to everyone he's ever wronged* and so on and so forth, Daniel squints at his face, trying to place it. He's tallish, with a buzz cut. Hair of an indeterminate color in this lighting. Long nose. Heavy forehead. Nope, seriously drawing a blank here. He wonders if Allen would remember *him*.

"...And I didn't think anything of it, because nothing really happened in the end, but then the months dragged on and you clearly felt really awkward with me in history, you would barely even look at the back row—"

Daniel puts up a hand and is fascinated to notice either it or the courtyard is wavering a little. The man falls silent, confused.

"I'm sorry," says Daniel solemnly. "But what's your name, again?"

The man's lips thin. "Joshua Mackey."

His automatic nod shifts into a head tilt, and now the courtyard is definitely weaving and bobbing. "Okay, that name definitely sounds familiar. But I'm afraid I still don't...?"

"How the hell did you not get beat *up all the time* back in school?"

And hello, what school did this guy go to? Is he sure he's at the right nine-year reunion right now?

"Are you familiar with the concept of a third-person limited perspective?" Daniel asks him.

A terrific crash of broken glass shatters the scene behind them and then an asshole is shouting over by the mural, unfortunately clear above the DJ playing Foreigner's I Want to Know What Love Is.

"We were just talking, for christ's sake! That's why we came here, isn't it? To talk to people?"

Daniel looks over his shoulder with a wince. He notices Joshua Mackey doing the same.

"You gonna go be in that photo?" he asks him, neutral, and the man drags his eyes away from the quarrel.

"Uh, no." He shrugs stiffly. "I wasn't in the original anyway, so."

Daniel nods and chews his lip.

He thinks about what he'd hoped for when he came here tonight, what he'd expected. He wanted to talk, right? He wanted to believe for a moment that people could meet again on the same ground but choose differently – that none of them were the eighteen-year-olds they had been, for better or for worse.

Daniel passes a brief hand over his eyes. When he drops it again, Josh is still standing there, slump-shouldered, eyes wandering the room, mouth dented a little bitterly.

“Hey,” says Daniel, and when Josh looks down, he angles a tired smile at him. “Look, I'm sorry. I'm not exactly at my best right now, 'm a bit drunk. But how about – sit down again, will you. How about you start from the beginning. Bet if you go back I'll start to remember everything.”

Josh hesitates before slowly sinking back down next to him at the table.

So he starts to talk, and, okay, Daniel hadn't meant the *beginning*-beginning? Like, this guy starts going in about his chaotic childhood and hard-drinking dad, and Daniel is really not equipped for the emotional calibre of the conversation. It turns out okay, though; seems like Josh just needs to get the words out.

At some point, Josh gets up and gets him a glass of water. They keep talking. Eventually the girls all drift over to the table one-by-one, minus Marty who has disappeared.

Josh shakes his hand before he leaves; they're not friends now, of course, but they're something more than they had been.

Susan slumps sideways to tuck her head onto Daniel's shoulder. “This night sucks.”

Daniel's too tired to point out it's kind of her fault. Anyway, she probably knows.

“*I* had a nice time,” says Barbara across the table. She pauses. “I mean, until the end there. Poor Jen. Also, I don't think that photo is going to turn out very good.”

“What was Tricia going to even *do* with it?” asks Ali. “There are no yearbooks in real life.”

“Maybe she was going to hang it on her wall back home, Dorian Gray-style,” says Daniel. He shifts in his seat, hand coming up to adjust Susan's weight against his side. He looks around the table. “You guys want to go get something to eat? I thought there'd be more food here for some reason.”

“You don't want to know what went down in that debate of the budget subcommittee,” says Barbara, but of course she proceeds to tell them all about it as they stand up and head for the exit.

Chapter 81: (life in the) village green preservation society

“Kreese woke up,” Robert told him the first morning. He didn't explain how he knew, and Johnny very quickly realized he didn't actually care. He'd never wondered for longer than a few seconds about Sensei during all those years after they split the first time. He thought: maybe he had used him too, in his own way.

“And?” he asked.

“And nothing,” said Robert, but he paused and lifted a cautious hand. “Yet.”

“Yet,” echoed Johnny, already tired about it.

A few days passed, time marked by the changing color of Johnny's bruises.

Robert woke up at six and was out the door by seven. If he thought it odd that Johnny was already up and at the table for breakfast, he didn't mention it.

He and Ashley had weekday mornings down to a science, or at least that's what it looked like to Johnny, who remembered science classes as being full with endless lab exercises: steps being followed to the letter for a result of no obvious import. (He didn't do so hot in those classes.)

They talked over the scraping and crunching of multigrain toast: what the day held for each and what they should have for dinner; bills Ashley would pay and dry-cleaning Robert would pick up after work; Robert might remember an invitation from a coworker a little too late for convenient scheduling and apologize; Ashley would say she needs the car on Friday, hers will be in for maintenance; the radio on the counter by the phone might say the Senate Judiciary Committee declined to remove the special anti-trust exemption enjoyed by Major League Baseball since 1922 and representatives of the Major League Baseball Players' Association warned there might be disruptions to the season if an agreement isn't reached—

A phone might ring.

Johnny would drag the last of his (overcooked) scrambled eggs around the plate and look out the large window of the Browns' dining room; there was nothing to really see in the large yard, it was just a lawn of grass. (Very nice grass, though, Daniel could learn a thing or —)

“John?” said Ashley, like she had said it more than once, and he would look over, because he didn't want to be rude to her.

She might gesture with the phone like it was nothing. “Call for you? He says his name is—”

And it would be Daniel, who didn't know when to quit.

After Robert left, Johnny washed the breakfast dishes because that was only fair, and Ashley disappeared for the better part of an hour into what he thought of as her rooms.

Everything turned doll house the moment they were gone from his sight – furniture and décor freezing into something fake, waiting to be filled again by the next made-up scene from a life. He assumed it felt different for Robert and Ashley. He hoped it did, anyway.

After breakfast, he went on runs around the neighborhood. Robert was fortunately the same shoe size, and Johnny didn't care so much about the rest of it; he'd run naked if he had to. But he didn't have to. The neighbors probably appreciated it, or would if they knew the alternatives. They didn't, so they continued their days not knowing the scandal they had been spared witnessing.

Bobby had bought a house ten minutes from his parents, so Johnny was familiar with the neighborhood – the notion of it, if not the specifics. He knew the wide, rolling streets on which he had to run because there were no sidewalks. He rarely saw anyone else outside; if someone was in the front yard, they were usually a landscaping employee. For all he really knew, the houses he passed sat empty. So maybe he could've ran naked anyway.

When he got back from his runs, he took a long shower. Robert and Ashley had forgotten to stock the guest bedroom with shampoo, and he hadn't mentioned it because he could make do with the soap; it

turned out it really didn't matter much.

He got out of the shower and dressed in the clothes he found in the guest bedroom dresser: they fit, somehow. The polo shirts were new and the jeans were too, but they still looked weirdly familiar. Johnny decided not to think about it.

In the late morning, he joined Ashley in the living room in front of the television for an hour. She spurned soap operas but was a big fan of game shows; that summer they were showing reruns of Caesar's Challenge and The Price is Right.

Ashley would make two cups of coffee and then curl up on one end of the plump, floral three-seater, eyes bright on the screen. Johnny sat on the other end and looked with detached appreciation at the centurion sidekick's thighs as a firefighter from South Bend, a seafood purchaser from Miami, and a electrical engineer from Vegas competed to win a cruise to the Bahamas and a dining room furniture set. He didn't really play along; he was not good at guessing words. He thought Daniel probably would've been.

The Price is Right was easier. A game for real Americans featuring practical knowledge. The part where they call people up from the audience was nice. They were always so excited, like this was the best thing that had ever happened to them. Often, they danced up the aisles. Johnny didn't think he'd ever once been as happy in his entire life as someone chosen to compete for a few minutes on The Price is Right.

“What do you think of that maplewood children's set?” asked Ashley.

But Johnny had been thinking about the Wurlitzer jukebox. It would look ridiculous in a house, probably.

“It's kinda boring,” he said.

She looked at him over the rim of her mug, quizzical. “Boring?”

He shrugged. “If you have a kid, wouldn't you want them sleeping in something cooler? Get some racing stripes on that crib. Trick it out with some stickers, something for the baby to look at that's not just... tasteful wood.”

Ashley could get offended – they were, after all, sitting in a room full of very tasteful wood. Instead, she said, “You know babies can only see out about a foot. They wouldn't be able to see any racing stripes.”

“Yeah, but then you'd be less bored looking at it too.”

“Why would I be bored looking at a crib if my baby is in it?”

He raised his eyebrows and his hands, compromising by not saying anything more. She smiled and shook her head and returned her attention to the TV in time to watch poor Edwin fail to get his ball in the winning hole.

In the afternoons, Ashley would have messages to run: bills to pay at Bloomingdales and Sears or some groceries to pick up. She always asked Johnny if he would like to keep her company. So he would find himself in the passenger seat of her Acura, watching Encino boulevards slip by into shopping mall after shopping mall.

She didn't seem to mind he was quiet. If she asked his opinion on a cut of meat or type of cheese or the pattern on a set of dessert plates, he would try to summon one; otherwise he wandered after her through the bright stores, looking at all the consumer goods that might become deeply, frantically, impossibly desirable, should they be featured on The Price is Right one day.

“You sure you want that kind?” he asked once, rescuing Ashley from choosing the wrong balsamic vinegar.

She glanced at the bottle, nonplussed. “It's what I usually get. Why, is something wrong with it?”

Johnny had no idea, but when he indicated the right type, she exchanged the bottles without a second thought or demand for explanation. Ashley was a reasonable person.

Robert usually arrived home after seven and they would all sit down to dinner.

They talked over the delicate tinkling of the cutlery: what the day had been like; who they had seen and talked to; what they should do that

upcoming weekend. Ashley's sunny, quiet domain of the day became in the evenings a home filled with gentle company, a place where people could share a life together for a few hours and be contented.

You never came back, Daniel said on the phone. And no, Johnny didn't belong there.

But he didn't belong here either.

“You sure?” is what Robert said when Johnny told him he needed to go home. He appeared reluctant, but he didn't argue with him.

Johnny changed back into the suit he had worn that first day and climbed into another passenger seat in another car.

The drive took half an hour. No matter which direction he looked in, it seemed like the little brown house in Van Nuys was perpetually just over the horizon. He couldn't turn his head far enough from it. The vision only faded once the car eased over the speed bumps of the Hill Terrace Condominiums parking lot; nothing could ever block out that array of blue buildings.

As Johnny got out of the BMW, Robert leaned across the seat and said:

“John – please look after yourself, okay?”

“Of course,” he said, resting a hand over the door. “I'll be fine.”

Robert pressed his lips together and nodded. He glanced through the windshield, and Johnny followed his gaze to the second floor, where the empty windows of his apartment stared back at them.

“I'll call you tomorrow,” said Robert.

Johnny nodded. “Sure. See you later.”

Across the parking lot and up the stairs he went. The walk way to his apartment was long and telescoping, his plain white door at its center and growing ever larger in his vision. It took no time before he was standing before it, hands automatically digging into his pocket for his keys. The first house key he found was for someplace else. He thought about throwing it over the railing into the bushes below, but in the

end prying the key ring open was too much work. He flipped to the next key and inserted it in the lock.

The door of his apartment swung open to the silence waiting inside. Johnny didn't hesitate as he stepped across the threshold.

Chapter 82: (the last two minutes of) november rain

Chapter Notes

just a headsup, this chapter references suicide

He kind of forgot he'd emptied the apartment of anything he might actually want, including his TV, VCR, and all the booze.

That first evening back at the condo, he tore through the kitchen looking for any possible overlooked bottle-of-something squirreled away in a drawer or disused cupboard. But of course there was nothing, just like there had been nothing six months previous when it was almost two in the morning and he couldn't sleep because he had a big lunch with an angry client the next day. He always knew searching was pointless but he kept looking anyway: apparently it was the one area in life in which he still managed to cultivate a sense of hope.

After this hope was gone, he went into the living room and sank down on the couch. He looked at the blank space of the white wall where the television had once been. He sat looking at it for a while.

The main problem was, he didn't want to kill himself.

He thought it would be easier if he did; at least he'd have something to plan for and do.

Maybe if he hadn't called the tow truck? Who knows. There was a different way that night a few weeks ago might have ended. He could have ordered one last beer for the road, stood and buttoned his suit jacket, and walked away from that bar (the car). Found out where the streets led him. There was this one bridge in Pasadena, they said.

He could picture it – the start, if not the ending. But maybe that was the whole point. He was still waiting for a suitable ending – explosions at the casino or a shootout in the abandoned warehouse. But at some point he'd stopped wanting one of the bodies lying around in the wreckage to be his own.

He didn't know how to feel about that. It wasn't a happy thought, after all, just an inconvenient one.

He wasn't prepared for how it would feel to lie down in his own bed again. The familiar slip of the sheets and the weight of his duvet, the smell of pillows which have never known a second head. The smell says: oh, you again.

Those walls and that ceiling and the particular shadows cast at night from the courtyard light.

It felt like time travel, or maybe that first disorienting moment when he's been awake long enough and he realizes he's sobering up after a night of drinking: thoughts suddenly locking into place after drifting, shaking off the fuzz and turning clear and he's *back*, back like he'd never left except the headache and queasy stomach tell him this is a lie. He went somewhere and it was, briefly, better – and he knew that was a lie too. But he'd wanted to believe.

He didn't set an alarm. He didn't care when he woke up.

He'd left his music behind, he remembered the next day, when the boredom and silence was starting to be too much.

He wiped his stereo down and hauled out his box of tapes and CDs, spread them out all across the floor of his living room. He didn't remember buying Higher Ground. Huh. Also forgot grabbing Warrant and – Gretchen Goes to Nebraska? What.

He slotted it into the tape deck and hit play and wandered away to brush his teeth.

He came back here to think and put together some kind of plan, but instead he found himself mostly drifting through the next couple days.

Without other distractions, the shape of his life became steadily more clear, an outline sketching out absence after absence. In the daylight it

was easier to focus on what he did have (fifty-plus tapes and CDs; a mortgage; the ability to do one-handed pushups) than what he didn't (a job; a purpose; a family). But at the end of each day the absences were waiting for him in the darkness of his bedroom.

He wondered how his life would've turned out if he hadn't joined karate. He might still have his mom, but he wouldn't have any of his friends. If he'd never seen his own name up on a wall, on a trophy, called out like a boast across a room full of cheering people – if the world had always just walked on by – maybe he could've found happiness being nobody. He never would have expected anything else.

Would he be a better person or just a weaker one?

“Ashley wants to know if you're eating,” Robert asked when he called.

Johnny thought about his stockpile of frozen burritos. “Yeah, I've got food.”

He says he has food, he said off to the side. Then he put his mouth back to the telephone and said, “She wants to know if you're eating vegetables.”

“You guys really need to just have a baby already,” is what Johnny concludes.

Late afternoon, maybe evening. He was doing a plank because he had nothing else to do. Guys in prison worked out all the time. He figured this was basically the same thing. Except at least he got music. He didn't think guys in prison got Axl Rose and Slash.

Someone knocked on his door. He ignored it (Condo Association).

The knocking continued (definitely Condo Association).

Except then Daniel's voice leaked through the door and down the entry hall and bloomed into the wider space of the apartment, immediately arresting all movement and thought:

“Johnny? You home?”

He collapsed out of the plank. He lay pressed to the carpet, arms outstretched from his sides like he was a soldier trying to hug the ground and duck enemy fire.

The space beneath his sofa was really dusty, he noticed. He has never once moved it, so there'd be no reason to vacuum there. But if he never moved it, how did dust even get under there? Why was absolutely everything in life a neverending list of chores and struggle?

“I called Bobby,” continued Daniel loudly. “He said you came back here and – look, Johnny, I can hear your music. Okay? So I know you're home. Open up.”

Blind Melon was still playing from the stereo. He always kinda felt that album was a mistake purchase; you see a Rolling Stone cover of a bunch of guys from LA standing around naked together and you get impulsive. It could happen to anyone. If they were gay.

Johnny narrowed his eyes and pushed carefully up from the floor until he was kneeling. He looked towards the entrance hall and thought: he was out there. All he'd have to do was walk over and open the door, and then he'd be in here. And he'd look at Johnny and Johnny would look at him and—

No, better not.

A moment later he found himself poised on light feet at the end of the hall. He looked at the door. He waited for the moment Daniel would go away.

But Daniel didn't go away; Daniel groaned obnoxiously and said, “Johnny, c'mon – oh, uh, hello.”

Johnny's head went back. He shifted on his feet, uneasy.

“Are you a friend of Mr Lawrence's?”

Fuck. Definitely the Condo Association. He knew it. At some point he was going to have to leave his apartment to buy more frozen burritos; he'd been thinking about the feasibility of going out his bedroom window and scaling the side of the building to avoid this exact scenario. He thought his door was being watched.

“Yeah, that's right,” said Daniel, polite and completely unaware who or what he was talking to. “Was just swinging by for a little, uh, Friday night hang.” It was Friday? “Sorry – and you are...?”

“Miranda Jackson, head of the Condo Association here at Hill Terrace. I've been trying to get in contact with Mr Lawrence for the past several weeks. We have a number of urgent items to discuss.”

To Johnny's horror, Daniel started to reply, sounding concerned (nosy): “Urgent, you say? But you haven't been able to—”

Johnny was at the door in three paces. He hauled it open and reached without looking at Margaret – Miranda? who-the-fuck-*ever*. He got a fist in the back of Daniel's shirt and yanked him inside, ignoring his alarmed yelp.

He shut the door again before M—— even finished opening her mouth in outrage.

“*Hi*,” says Daniel on a deep breath. He clears his throat and resets his shirt with a light shake of his shoulders. His eyes dip. “Oh. You're – naked. Okay.”

Johnny folds his arms and widens his eyes at him.

“...Guess that's why you didn't come to the door before, huh,” says Daniel, trying for a smile.

He shakes his head and turns away.

Chapter 83: (he can't say) go now

He walks into the kitchen and around the end of the island to give himself a little cover, not that he needs it or cares at all. He sets his wrists against the counter and watches Daniel slowly enter the room.

One week ago, he was – what? Leaving the house to go train with Kreese with his thighs still warm from Daniel's thrusting cock. Johnny had been given the whole world and it still wasn't enough. He looks at him now and wonders what the hell he'd been thinking.

And Daniel doesn't look right, at all, standing in this apartment with his bare arms and bare gaze, his attention bright on Johnny like a spotlight, expectant and unwavering. He doesn't belong here. He shouldn't be looking at Johnny at all.

Daniel walks casual-not-casual fingers along the top of the counter. “So,” he says, “you hang around here with no clothes on often?”

No clothes means no decision about which clothes to wear, means no laundry to do. He narrows his eyes defensively at Daniel. “Something wrong with that?”

“No! Nothing – didn't know you were a nudist, is all.” His eyes slide away and he clears his throat, adding like he just can't help himself, “I mean, it seems a *little* weird, draping one's balls over all the furniture —”

“My furniture,” he says flatly, “my balls.”

“Right,” says Daniel. “Well. Can't argue with that.”

Johnny bites back a sigh. “What are you doing here?”

He gives Johnny a disbelieving look. “Leaving aside how upset you were the last time I saw you, and how you basically said *nothing* when I tried talking to you on the phone – you never came home. And you left your bike at the house.” He shrugs. “Figured you'd need it, at least. Public transportation being what it is around here.”

“My bike,” says Johnny. His eyes move past Daniel to the door, but it's probably too soon to go out there. M—— might be still lying in wait. “You brought my bike? You – what, you drove it over here?”

“Yes,” says Daniel, chin up; Johnny waits and he slumps a little. “And

it was terrifying. I still can't really feel my legs."

It's surprising he was even able to pick the bike up; Johnny does not say this. He has a more important thought. "Did you bring my TV too?"

"Your—" His eyebrows shoot up, incredulous. He slaps his palms down on the counter and leans forward. "*No,* Johnny, I didn't bring your damn TV. You know, if you'd bought a car instead of that impractical death mobile like I said before, maybe *then* I could have brought your TV, and your VCR, and all your clothes and—"

He cuts himself off, and Johnny has to endure the sight of his unhappy expression as he looks down at the counter.

"The TV would fit on the back of the bike," he says after an awkward moment, mostly to annoy the other man, because this is preferable to him looking like Johnny murdered his dog or whatever. "You could, like, just get some bungee cords and strap it down—"

"I guess that's just what you'll have to do, then," says Daniel with false brightness and a wide smile. "Next time you come over, I mean."

"You're holding my TV hostage now?"

Daniel shrugs and flaps a hand. "Sure, guess so. No mercy, or whatever."

Johnny bites the inside of his cheek. "I'm not sucking your cock," he says.

The next stare Daniel gives him lasts a while. Johnny makes himself not add anything else, because it's just as likely he'll change his mind immediately or say something even more embarrassing.

"I didn't ask you to," Daniel says at last.

Johnny nods neatly down at the counter. "Then why are you here?"

A brief silence: the apartment taking back what belongs to it. Words and sounds and whatever feeling that had made the two of them feel like a natural fit before.

"Please don't do that," Daniel says quietly. "Don't pretend that's all it was."

A darting glance shows a twisted mouth and faintly pleading eyes.

Johnny decides he can't do this. He walks around the island, careful to keep a neutral distance. He skirts the edge of the living room and heads for the hallway.

“What are you doing?” says Daniel at his back. “Finally going to put on some clothes so we can talk like normal human beings?”

“I'm taking a shower,” says Johnny without looking around. “You can do whatever the hell you want.”

In the bathroom he takes a long shower as cold as he can stand it, until the skin on his back has went from flinching to numb and his head aches sharply and he's on the verge of shivering.

The mirror is clear and unfogged afterwards. It shows a man with a jawline blurred by stubble and empty eyes camouflaged poorly by ugly, greenish bruising. Johnny looks at him for a while. Ultimately, he can't summon the energy to shave or comb his hair, make that man appear like anything other than what he is.

He towels down and pulls on a pair of boxers and goes back out to find Daniel has, of course, not left yet.

“What have you been eating?” Daniel asks over his shoulder as he methodically snoops through every cupboard in the kitchen. “There's like, no food in this place.”

Johnny debates whether it is worth pointing out the cache of frozen burritos. In the end he gets distracted watching Daniel's easy, proprietary movements as he moves around the space, and he forgets to reply.

He hitches himself against the counter and leans his face on his fist, feeling generally pretty weary and hopeless as Daniel finishes his inventory of the kitchen and pronounces it not just *inadequate,* but *almost kind of disturbing*, like *this is the kind of kitchen you'd find in an abandoned apartment after the world has ended and discovering a single can of olives becomes something to celebrate as a feast.*

A week ago Johnny might have crowded him against the counter until Daniel couldn't ignore him any longer and the words started to break apart as his breath caught and his mouth curved up into a knowing smile, because he knew what Johnny was after and was oh-so-pleased to give it; he'd snake his arms around Johnny's middle and his eyes would give permission while his body gave a command and—

“Why are you here?” asks Johnny, again.

Daniel turns around. He takes in the sight of Johnny against the counter and hesitantly mirrors him, planting his elbows and leaning forward across from him. His dark eyes search Johnny's, every thought and feeling transparent, legible. Johnny wishes they could skip this part, move past the good person obligation and go their separate ways. It feels almost cruel to linger.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay,” he says.

“Well, I'm not,” Johnny tells him.

Chapter 84: (he wishes he wasn't) in the presence of another world

“What did Kreese do?” asks Daniel.

Johnny doesn't know why he's asking. Is Daniel hoping for a Good Reason, maybe The Right Reason which will make everything miraculously okay – or it is Johnny who wants that, who wants to spill his guts for the other man to sift through in the hopes of finding something worth the trouble? He doesn't know, but thinking about it feels pointless and confusing.

“Does it matter?” says Johnny.

Daniel shrugs a little. “Seemed to matter to you,” is all he says.

Johnny shifts on his feet, mouth twitching at the corner. “So, what, I tell you how he hurt my feelings, and suddenly you're going to feel more comfortable about the whole thing? Until the next time, of course.”

“Oh, already planning for a next time, are you?” says Daniel mildly. He gives a little side-to-side nod. “I'm no doctor, but you might want to let your hand rest a bit first.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don't,” he says, and frustration flattens his mouth, makes him lean forward, eyes intent. “Swear to god, Johnny, I never have. But I'm trying. I feel like I'm *always trying*—”

“Well, maybe you should stop,” he says loudly, something like humiliation and hurt and impatience making him straighten up from the counter. “If it's so hard. Stop wasting your fucking time.”

“I didn't say it was a waste of my time.”

“Right, of course,” he says with a bitter laugh. “Why would you? Nothing Daniel LaRusso chooses to do could possibly ever end up badly, could ever be a waste of time. Never mind you read the novelization of that stupid dinosaur movie the other week—”

Daniel's eyes fly wide in outrage. “Okay, one, you know you're the only person on the planet who didn't like Jurassic Park, right? Sorry

no one karate-chopped a raptor, Johnny. And two, that wasn't a novelization, it was the book the movie was based on."

"What's the difference?"

"What – what's the *difference*—"

And Johnny has never heard Daniel's voice go this high before. He watches him twist away from the counter and take a breath, and Johnny is annoyed to realize they have fallen into a stupid rhythm, they've let themselves get distracted like they always do, like they could live in moments like this and forget who they each are, who Johnny is.

"Kreese didn't do anything," he says into the quiet.

Daniel twists around to frown at him skeptically.

Johnny bites his cheek and shrugs, searches for the right words. "Or, I mean – he was an asshole. But big deal, right? You probably could've told me that ten years ago. Bobby certainly did. Multiple times. A bunch of people did, actually," he adds, thinking about Sam Lee.

Daniel slowly turns back to the counter, silent but listening. Johnny meets his eyes for an unbearable moment and looks away down the length of granite. He doesn't want to talk about this. What point is there to any recitation of his failures and blindspots? They both know them all too well.

"I uh, I told you, Kreese outed me to my mom, right?" he says, and Daniel nods. "But it turns out he's actually a fag too." He makes a noise that never quite manages to become a laugh. "And he, he just – he did that to me. I don't know why. I mean, I can guess, I guess." He grits his teeth and looks back at Daniel, forcing himself to admit: "But the thing is, when he first contacted me again – even knowing what he did, and – and everyday for all these years, waking up to this same fucking shit. Even knowing, I was still so fucking *grateful* to hear his voice on the phone."

Daniel watches him, mouth a grim slashed line.

"But why?" Johnny asks him. "Why?"

His knee bounces against the wall of the island, his hands move out from his sides, wrists bending and fingers restless. His body wants to escape this moment, but there is no escape. This is the only reality

there is to live in.

“All that guy taught me was how to be someone who doesn't fit. How to hurt people – I hurt you,” he says, with a desperate gesture. “And I didn't even *care*. I hurt – it doesn't matter. Do you see?” and he spreads his hands, which shake slightly in the air; he probably hasn't drank enough water in the past couple days, actually. “It doesn't matter what Kreese did – in the end, he didn't actually do anything, really. It was me. I chose all of it.”

And he's maybe almost breathing hard when he finally stops talking, but that doesn't make any sense because he might have let a lot of things lapse over the years but his cardio should still be top notch, his lung capacity and heart rate should be *golden.* Instead he feels like he's on the verge of that weird thing that happened to him once or twice at the office; his pulse goes thready and he can't stand up and he feels like the world is ending. But this can't happen, not now. Daniel will never leave if Johnny passes out.

“You chose all this, huh,” says Daniel, meanwhile. Unreadable.

Johnny twitches his shoulders like he's shaking off a fly. “You see anyone else standing in this apartment?”

“...Guess not.” But his jaw is cocked to the side stubbornly and he doesn't sound particularly convinced; well, fuck him.

Johnny doesn't have time for his delusions; he has left wonderland behind. There is only this: his apartment, and his bills, and the days stretching out ahead of him. Same as always.

“You can just – just go home, man. It's okay. Really.”

“It's... okay?” says Daniel, checking; neutral. “You're not okay, you said. But it's okay?”

Johnny starts to relax. He nods. “Yeah.”

Daniel nods back at him, once. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Relief descends. He swallows lightly and tries to form his expression into something appropriately stable and reassuring with just a smidge of *okay so get the fuck out*. It hurts to look at him. He wants him gone.

Except then Daniel says, “I'm not leaving you in this place with

nothing to eat."

Johnny blinks. "What?"

"What?" says Daniel.

"No, I mean," and he is restless again, jittery: wrong-footed and helpless. "Like – what?"

Daniel spreads his hands, doing a passable job of also looking *sincerely confused.* "What?"

Johnny gives up and buries his face in his hands.

So they go to a fucking grocery store.

Johnny dresses in the clothes he'd left here on Monday morning, forgetting until he sees Daniel's expression after he emerges from the bedroom that the shirt technically belongs to the other man; it's too late to change without making a whole thing of it. But, great. Perfect.

He refuses to use the bike because he doesn't want to feel Daniel behind him, and Daniel doesn't insist on the bike because the bike can't carry groceries *anyway*, just like he *said before* and apparently will keep fucking saying forever and ever and—

The walk to Vons takes twenty minutes.

They have to hug the side of a highway for the last leg, walking single file over litter-and-weeds as traffic screams past from a few feet away, the occasional horn registering a complaint – about them, the other cars, the swirling chaotic misery that is life, who can say. Johnny walks doggedly ahead, picking his way through the broken glass and cracks in the concrete, his eyes narrowed and fixed on their goal on the far side of the overpass. He tries to think about nothing.

The store is really busy, it being Friday after work-if-you-have-work. Everyone is in a hurry to get home, kick back, go out, get smashed, or pass out. None of those things can be accomplished without food, apparently.

“Okay,” says Daniel after he has commandeered a cart. “What do you like to eat?”

He doesn't know which is more humiliating, being talked to like he's a kid or him not really having an answer to the question. He should have refused to come. He should have let Daniel walk out the door of his apartment and then quickly shut it in his surprised, pissy face. Left him standing there out in the open for the Condo Association woman to prey upon.

“Pizza?” he says and before Daniel's expression can finish lighting up, he clarifies, “frozen pizza? Could grab four or five, really stock up....”

“I know what you're trying to do,” Daniel informs him; Johnny looks back at him blankly. “And it's not going to work.”

He shoves the cart rattling forward across the floor towards the produce section, and Johnny has no real choice but to trail after him, scowling at the back of his glossy, dark head.

He makes sure to keep a safe distance of a few feet, however. He doesn't want it to seem like they're here together. He can't let down his guard.

Turns out shopping for Daniel with a list in hand is nothing on shopping *with* Daniel. He takes forever with everything: clucking his tongue when the store is out of his brand of crushed tomatoes; closely scrutinizing the label of the brand they do have in stock; heaving a sigh and grimacing before finally relenting and placing the can in the cart with a delicate hint of distaste.

He is an advertising firm's one-man focus group's dream come true. Except not really, because before the team finishes collating all the data from his responses, they'll start to realize just how much of an outlier he is from the average American consumer; they'll look back on the hours of their time Daniel has wasted and panic about whether to bill the client for all of them and how they will even begin to explain the mistake; they'll realize they need to start over from the beginning. Meanwhile Daniel will still be talking about acidity levels. The team will start to consider going up to the roof and taking a walk over the edge, and it would be for the best, probably, because the world won't exactly miss a handful of marketing people. So maybe Daniel saves the day in the end after all.

“You the kind of person who can eat tuna?” asks Daniel.

Johnny blinks and looks up from the cart, which is somehow already half full, to where he is standing next to a shelf of canned fish. He thinks about it and shrugs.

“Great,” says Daniel briskly, immediately grabbing a stack of four small cylinders. “Any time you're feeling too, um – if you're not in the mood to cook, you can just put some of this on toast? Easy, right?”

“Yeah,” says Johnny. If he just agrees with everything, maybe this will be over sooner.

Things go smoothly from there, Johnny nodding and no longer really paying attention to what goes into the cart. Instead, he watches Daniel's hands move: turning items over, gripping and lifting. He watches his eyes as he studies the shelves, thoroughly engrossed in his task.

Even if it was a week ago, Johnny would not be able to walk up behind Daniel and thump his forehead down on his shoulder and close his eyes. They're in public and it'd be too obvious, probably. But he'd want to, and Daniel would probably let him because he is shameless – he might reach back without looking and pat Johnny's hip with pitiless humor, *there, there, we're almost done.*

Of course, if it was a week ago, Johnny would be going home with Daniel afterwards. He'd have something to look forward to, a different reason to want to leave the store as quickly as possible.

He surfaces again at the checkout counter, looking down the gauntlet of magazines covers and candy bars and across the stretch of the emptied cart at Daniel, who is reaching for his wallet. Johnny frowns and takes hold of the cart's handles, uses it to push at him.

He looks over, distracted from watching the clerk ring up his heads of lettuce. “What? Stop that,” because the cart is hitting him in the ankles.

Johnny rolls his eyes and shoves the cart with more force, until Daniel has no choice but to stumble forward through the checkout line. He pushes him all the way through and reaches for his own wallet, glancing sideways at Daniel's irritated expression.

“I have money,” he says.

Daniel drags the cart out of the way so he can step in close to Johnny. He says in an undertone, “Yeah, but you don't have a job, so how long

__”

Johnny's face warms and he glances at the clerk, who does not look over at them. He grits his teeth and weighs the options he has to make a reply with: he could tell Daniel about the money left over from his trust fund and then deal with the tedious, depressing details of that whole shit show; he could explain he never really spent money on anything that wasn't music and alcohol; he could tell him to call up Robert and bother *him* about it, if he is so curious; he could plead the fifth; he could say *it's none of your fucking business.*

“I have money,” he says again, tone a little hard. He stares Daniel down until the other man looks away and reluctantly steps back.

Outside the store, burdened with all the groceries and supplies he hadn't asked for, Johnny looks at Daniel and says:

“You know, I don't need your pity.”

Daniel pauses in reaching to grab a few of the bags and looks up at him with bright-eyed dismay. “It's not pity, Johnny. I'm just worried about you.”

“What's the difference?” he asks and he swings the bags away from Daniel's grasping hands and starts the long walk home.

Chapter 85: Giovanni's Room(s)

Chapter Summary

story accompaniment

It was going to go like this:

They will arrive back at Johnny's apartment and unpack the groceries. Maybe Johnny will shrug indifferently when Daniel asks him where he'd like the various items, and Daniel will have to take charge and organize the pantry, whatever. And then Daniel will get started on making them dinner.

A pat of butter dropped into a frying pan on low flame; a bisected onion peeled and turned into a row of perfectly even, thin slices. Add these to the shimmering pool of melted butter. A quiet sizzle will fill the room and then the quiet will feel more right.

Johnny will station himself along the other side of the counter, silent and stiff, but maybe as Daniel continues assembling some quick food, the line of his spine will bend and relax. He'll fold forward, eyes clearing, surfacing: intent on Daniel's preparations. And then—

And then, what? Johnny will forget himself? All that means is Daniel will have to watch him remember later.

So it goes like this:

Johnny unlocks his door and uses his shoulder to shove it open. Without looking around, he uses his elbow to push the door closed after he has stepped inside; Daniel catches it a moment before it shuts against his nose. Okay.

He is less aggressive about shutting the door. When he walks into the kitchen, Johnny has dumped his grocery bags on the counter and abandoned them for the living room.

Daniel glances from the top of the pale head poking out over the end of the sofa to the bags on the counter. He mentally shrugs and starts unpacking them – some of the items need to be stored in the fridge. He didn't make them go on the world's most grim grocery haul only to let the milk go warm afterwards.

If Johnny hears the rustle of the plastic bags, he doesn't react to it.

The silence that grows feels itself plastic-wrapped: tight and constricting, oxygen disappearing and returning as something elementally unfit to support life.

Finally, the last can has been placed in the cupboard, and the last plastic bag has been shoved away beneath the sink. Daniel pauses and looks down at his hands on the counter. He notices his right still has a film of grime beneath the nails and curls his fingers beneath his palm, hiding them out of sight. He ticks his mouth to the side and his eyes come up, automatically seeking out that glimpse of blond at the end of the sofa in the other room.

He sighs soundlessly and steps back from the counter.

“I put your groceries away,” he says, walking over. He looks over the back of the sofa at Johnny, who is lying on his side staring at the opposite wall. As Daniel leans over, those blue eyes move to the far edge of their sockets to track him.

“Thanks,” says Johnny, quiet. This is better than Daniel expects, but then he adds, “So when are you leaving?”

Since he opened his door, Johnny has aimed for hostile and missed the mark like someone trying to blot the sun out with his thumb. The words are right and his expression tries, but his body language gives the game away – and what does he expect Daniel to listen to after all this time? Even when they were nothing they had this understanding between them.

So Daniel can't unsee any of it: fading bruises borne without pride or care, the anxious restlessness. The misery. The empty longing. Johnny says none of this matters and words, words, words but what about the long stretch of pale hip and stomach laid bare across this sofa by the ancient, too-small shirt taken from Daniel's closet? It is impossible to look at Johnny and not picture him spread out on a different couch, wearing a different expression; it impossible not to look at Johnny and know he wants to picture it too.

The image is clear, but that doesn't make it real.

“Do you really want me to leave?” asks Daniel quietly, and he watches Johnny's eyes move forward again, his lids falling in a deliberate blink.

“I think you better, yeah.”

Daniel nods and, that decided, walks around the sofa to perch on the edge of the middle seat. Johnny doesn't react except to go stiff where he's bowed around him on the seat; his fingers drag along the fabric of the cushion before he shoves them beneath his head out of sight.

He looks at Daniel and Daniel looks back.

“I mean, is that what everyone did before, they gave you space?” he asks, and Johnny says nothing, doesn't move. Daniel puts his elbows on his knees and turns to the wall Johnny had been looking at; it needs some color, he thinks. “Okay. So what will you do?” he asks that blank wall.

The words come like something being dredged up from the water: a car wreck, maybe; three dead inside, they couldn't get out in time. “Don't know – get a job, I guess. The usual.”

“The usual,” echoes Daniel, and he gives him a quietly skeptical sidelong look. “So that's it? You're done trying?”

Johnny's mouth flattens. “Yeah, sure. Done trying to be someone I'm not.”

That's not what you were doing, Daniel thinks, because this doesn't match his own reading of the past few weeks. He'd thought – he isn't sure what he thought. That Johnny was figuring something out? That Daniel was making a space possible for him to do that.

If he hasn't been helping him, then what was he even doing this whole time?

Blood rising up, denying and insistent, he leans over Johnny and reaches to cup his face. His jaw fits into his palm, the corner of his bruise-darkened eye beneath the pad of his dirt-lined thumb. Johnny grits his teeth against his touch and a muscle flickers against his palm.

“So, what?” asks Daniel, throat dry and kind of hurting. “*This* was a lie?”

“No,” Johnny tells him instantly, turning his face into the grip. He shifts until he is lying more on his back than his side. His knees bend and crook up and knock against the seat back, anxious. “It just doesn't matter.”

The grip becomes a grasp. “That's not true. You don't mean that.”

Johnny stares up at Daniel and his eyes are relentless like the open sky, blue so blisteringly clear it feels impossible that anything could live there; reach too hard for it and you'll find yourself falling up, never landing, reaching at a borderless existence until even the blue abandons you and the darkness takes over; you can look over the glowing surface of everything that ever was and ever will be and think, so it was finite after all.

Numb, Daniel takes his hand away and folds it up with his left between his knees.

“I'm sorry,” says Johnny and this, he sounds like he does mean. His voice cracks. “Daniel, I – I'm sorry.”

All he has ever wanted from Johnny was for him to want him back and for it to actually mean something, to make a difference – *the* difference.

The long *what if* of Daniel's life and here is the answer. Maybe he was smarter when he was a teenager.

Chapter 86: Operation: What You Leave

*your tv
(look, it was an expensive set,
top of the line)

*vcr
(ditto)

*all three *rage and honor* tapes

*the incredulity you felt when you looked
over to see if daniel caught
that incredible high kick from rothrock
but daniel isn't watching the movie;
daniel's got his nose stuck in some book

*the boniness of his knee beneath your palm
when you shook his leg to get his attention

*his casual inquiring look as he glanced up,
which quickly transformed into wide-eyed
astonishment as you pulled the book
from his lap and replaced it
with your body

*his strong callused hands
on your thighs

*all those new pairs of jeans you bought.

*your walkman

*the box
whose contents you no longer fully recall
but this much you do know:
it held the last parts of yourself
from when you were whole

and loved
(or something like it)

*that quietly thrilling sensation of being
on the run,
hiding out,
getting away with something.

*hours,
which melted into days:
days you caught yourself wishing
hadn't passed so quick

*an easy answer to the unvoiced question of *who are you?*
you were many things,
(and there were many more you were not)
but never mind all that
because at the time you could simply say
you were his

*any and all
willingness
desire
patience or
(if you're being honest)
ability to pretend to be straight ever again

*the easy assumption
of other faces, voices

*the smell of coffee coaxing
you down the hallway and into the kitchen
where the heat of the mug turned your fingerprints
red as the others chattered
(bitched)
and the room was full but not so full
you didn't fit
somehow there was always space enough
and light too

*the quiet
which is different
than the silence
you must now cover up
any way you can

*a reason to get up in the morning
any reason.

*his smile

*his eyes

*his hands

*the smell of the dew of clean sweat rising on his soft underbelly
after you have had his cock
in your mouth for over ten minutes
and he's being patient but you're being patient*er*
which you can be because you're full and content
and he says you're incredible like he really means it;
you don't have to worry about him coming too soon
because there is more where that came from
so long as your mouth is being put to use,
and daniel sounds like he'd like that, yes, like that, never stop
never

*daniel looking at you without
the knowledge of what you are
casting a shadow over his expression

*a future where the shame
of your past
doesn't sit on your chest
and make you watch
as it peels back the skin
to show you what lies beneath;
what's been inside you
all along
(your mom, maybe she

could see it? maybe
she put it there)

*a life that did not contain the eventuality of having to write a resume

*your bruises
(they are fading;
very soon,
like everything else,
they will be gone)

Chapter 87: folsom prison (different prison) blues

He drifted. The world let him.

Time and other people slid past: faint shapes in the gloom, the space between them thick and impenetrable. Light came and went, filling the rooms of his apartment with tidal shadows that crept across the walls before withdrawing again. Faces on the street and in stores grew unrecognizable, and the one in the mirror most of all as it dissolved into alien parts refusing to sum. Here: thick stubble, course and ugly. Here: a mouth, thin-lipped and lax. Here: eyes—

Then, one day, he woke up and thought about visiting Dutch up in Lompoc.

He didn't know what made him think of it; why he felt compelled to action after months of being frozen by quiet guilt. Days and weeks when he was relieved to not think of him, because if he didn't think of him, maybe he wasn't in prison. Maybe he didn't exist at all and Johnny neither.

Visiting was easier said than done – apparently it wasn't as simple as driving up and knocking on the prison door and asking to see him. This was not an impulse Johnny could satisfy immediately; he had to *plan* and *wait*. Somehow, he didn't give up on the whole thing immediately. He suddenly had purpose and purpose felt a little like a miracle.

“Want me to come with?” asked Tom, when he called him to ask what he needed to do to arrange the visit.

“You come with, how are we supposed to talk about you behind your back?” said Johnny. He leaned over the counter beside the telephone and looked down at the notepad he'd been scrawling instructions on. He seesawed the pen over a knuckle until it fell with a clatter and rolled away. “The thing about the accepted visitor list, what do I have to do for that? Like, do prisoners have an answering machine, how do I tell him to get me added? Do I have to write him and wait for him to write me back?” How long was all this going to take.

“You don't need to do anything about that,” said Tom. “You're already on his list.”

Johnny paused. He put his head back and blinked up at the ceiling.

Somewhere in the past, Dutch ran a rough hand over Johnny's newly shaved head, his palm rasping and clasping as he crowed *Make-A-Wish, John-Boy!*

“John?”

“Right,” he said. He cleared his throat and picked the pen back up. “Okay. So, uh, what should I bring?”

A few days later, Johnny woke up before dawn to get an early start on the three-hour drive up to Lompoc. The weather was mild, though the sky clearing and opening up as he left LA behind promised proper July heat later.

It was a Saturday. He wondered what Daniel was going to do with his day. He probably didn't know anyone who was incarcerated.

He'd made Ventura and turned north on the 101 by the time the sun rose up over the bluffs. Light spilled across the road and reached further, turning the dark crashing expanse of the Pacific into a brilliant blue that almost glowed. The world grew bigger, expanding beyond the edges of his comprehension.

He'd left his helmet in the compartment on the back of the bike and the ocean wind now whipped at his hair, startlingly tangible the way only salt breeze gets. He leaned into the caress and gunned his engine, and the coast ran out in front of him, welcoming.

It didn't feel like a coincidence that the road veered away from the coast as one neared Lompoc. The area felt more Central Valley than Central Coast: the ocean dropping away, followed by the hills, until all that was left was a flat, featureless plain cut through with concrete.

The city itself felt like nothing he'd need to see again and barely before he knew it he'd passed through. Blocks became land became fields that felt deliberately empty; became rows of fencing; became a prison.

The sky had clouded over, leaving a dull grey backdrop for the guard towers. Johnny parked and sat a moment on his bike, looking around at the sprawling complex of walls and fences, the large flat buildings.

He wondered if the sky looked different in the prison yard than it did out in the parking lot.

It was almost nine. Visiting hours had begun.

The guards looked at him like they knew he belonged inside. Every aspect of his person was scrutinized: for identification, for contraband. Maybe some of them didn't like something about his face, the way he stood. Or maybe they just looked at everyone like this – went home and fixed their girlfriends or wives with the same lazy, hard stare.

John met their eyes like he wasn't thinking how to duck and disable one of them if they swung their baton, like he wasn't keenly aware of the number of doors at his back between him and the outside. It felt stamped on his forehead: *criminal*, or perhaps *fag*, which was likely the same thing to these men.

Eventually his forms were accepted and he was led through to the visiting area, which was a large room with a low ceiling full of maybe two dozen tables. An inmate sat at each table, spread out like a deck of cards in Solitaire.

The uniforms weren't too bad, John thought. A plain grey work shirt and dark denim trousers. He'd heard there was a sheriff in Arizona who made every man wear pink underwear. Though he supposed they could be doing that here; he wouldn't exactly be able to tell.

He walked through the rows and came to stand above the table he'd been directed to, where a dark-haired man sat waiting.

The man leaned back on the bench seat and gave him a long, hard squint with eyes that were so dark, they were nearly black. He said nothing in greeting. His lips pinched around a cigarette, and he sucked in a deeply skeptical lungful of smoke before letting it spill back out in an indifferent fog.

“You're not wearing pink underwear, are you?” asked Johnny.

The cigarette ticked to the side as Dutch's face split with a grin. He pointed up at him. “Tommy said you'd come over all fruity, but I didn't expect you to lead with that. That why you took so long coming up here, you kept thinking about my underwear and getting too excited?”

Johnny rolled his eyes and sat down. He glanced around the room at the other tables, the location of the guards. “I was gonna bring you some beer, but I guess that's not allowed.”

“Nah,” he said. “The rules around here aren't too bad compared to some other places I hear about, but they're still pretty fucking stupid about a lot of things.”

Johnny nodded and looked at him: the familiar face, a little broader and weather-beaten from too much time in the sun. He thought about it and reached for the pack of cigarettes sitting at Dutch's elbow.

Used to be, they'd play a game at lunch. Johnny would steal something from Dutch's tray, and Dutch would do his best to pin his hand with enough driving force to damn near crack the table. Now, Dutch's arm twitched but he held himself back; the guards had said no touching was allowed. He was stuck glaring narrowly as one of his cigarettes was hijacked over the table, across the border.

Johnny gave him a close-mouthed smile before sticking the cigarette between his lips. Dutch flicked his lighter and cupped it up to the cigarette's end, helping him light it. A guard called over a warning. Dutch just waved him off.

“These fucking guys,” he said to Johnny in an undertone, tossing the lighter down again. “Petty little bitches, every one of 'em.”

Johnny blew out some smoke and fiddled with the cigarette, nodding. “Yeah, they seem like a drag.”

“They think they're so tough, too, that's the worst of it. Standing around with those heavy belts, constantly pulling their pants up over their guts – in a one-on-one fight, bare-knuckle, you know I could take any of them down in less than ten seconds.”

“Five, even,” said Johnny.

“Damn straight.”

They sat and smoked and regarded each other for a while. Johnny hadn't really smoked much since high school – Sensei would've killed him – and he never had much of a taste for it, anyway. But it felt good to share something with Dutch then, in that place.

“Tommy said something about you training with the old bitch again,” said Dutch. “Said it ended bad, didn't give much detail.”

Johnny shrugged a little, watched the ash grow at the end of his cigarette. “Turned out to be bullshit. He was just using me to get back at some guy, I don't know.”

“Tommy said Bobby said, you gave him the beatdown of a lifetime.”

Johnny didn't want to talk about that. “Yeah, guess I did.”

“Fuck it, he deserved it,” Dutch told him flatly. “Hell, thinking about all the licks he gave out back then, I'd like a chance at him myself.”

It didn't fix anything, he wanted to say; it didn't make me feel better.

“How often you talk to Tommy, anyway?” he asked instead.

It was Dutch's turn to shrug. “He calls. Maybe every other week, sometimes more.”

“He's a good friend,” he said, thinking: I haven't been. Johnny wasn't a good man – Dutch wasn't either, for that matter – but he thought maybe he should at least be a good friend. He could try, anyway.

He took a drag of the cigarette, one long enough to scrape up his throat and make his voice come out a little tight against the urge to cough. “I uh, I guess I haven't really seen much of him lately.” He lost the battle and coughed a little. “Or anyone, really.”

“Yeah, me either,” said Dutch. “But I'm locked up. What your excuse?”

Johnny's mouth twisted, and he flicked ash vindictively across the table. Dutch wiped at it carelessly with his blunt fingers.

“So what's this place like, anyway?” he asked a little while later.

“Eh, not too bad.” Dutch looked around the room. “Mostly, it's boring as hell. Too many fucking guys, I'll tell you that much. But I hold my own alright. I mostly get left alone. Had to break a guy's jaw a month ago, but you know how it is.”

Johnny did, but he kind of wished he didn't.

They talk for another hour, Johnny filling Dutch in on all goings-on he knew of, which he was beginning to realize wasn't a whole lot. They ended up talking about Tommy behind his back after all, mostly to make a bet on how long the marriage was going to last. Dutch gave it two years; his reasoning was, Jen was really hot and Tommy's spirit had been broken long ago by Susan. Johnny thought this was the

stupidest thing he'd ever heard; Dutch said he wouldn't get it, because he never had, because he was a fuckin' queer.

Time came, too soon, where the guard came by to tell them to wrap it up. Dutch's grin faded. Some of the light went out of his eyes as he glanced up at the man in acknowledgement.

“Can I uh – Tommy said something about money?” asked Johnny, standing. The space between them already felt larger than the length of the table. Soon, he would be standing outside and Dutch would still be here, waiting. “There's some kind of store or something in here you get stuff from? Or like, is there anything I should send you, that it doesn't have?”

He nodded. “The commissary, yeah. Thanks.” Then his eyebrows shot up and he leaned forward over the table, urgent. “Hey, man, can you send me some skin mags?”

Being a good friend was already a little weird. “Yeah, sure.”

“*Fuck, yes*. Oh – but Johnny,” he added seriously, forestalling him with a cautioning hand. “Tits not dicks, okay? I mean it.”

“I think I can manage that,” said Johnny.

Chapter 88: johnny strikes up the band (kind of)

A few days later, Robert called. Johnny was trying to avoid unnecessary house calls from well-meaning visitors, so he picked up.

“So,” said Robert, like he was already halfway through an itinerary review. “People should start showing up around noon. We're holding it at our place this year instead of at my parents', Ash is so nervous, I think she's kind of losing it. Do you think you could stop by someplace and pick up an extra bottle of Rosé?”

Johnny frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The barbecue.” Johnny said nothing and Robert's tone turned cautiously concerned. “Johnny, today's the fourth. Why do you think I'm calling in the middle of what should be billable hours?”

“Yeah, I know. I know it's the fourth,” he said, though he hadn't, quite. He'd noticed the flags and stuff cropping up in the past week, but he hadn't really thought about it. Some people just like the colors red, white, and blue. It's like the top color scheme in several divisions for marketing.

“So, you're coming to the barbecue,” checked Robert.

Johnny's mouth fell open on an instinctive denial but instead his jaw wavered, uncertain. The thought of driving to Encino and standing around in various circles of men making small talk made him want to ride his bike into the ocean. But he wasn't going to feel much better sitting around this place by himself, now that he knew it was the fourth.

He wondered if Daniel was going over to his old friend's place. Or maybe he was hosting something in Van Nuys: grilling up convoluted gourmet dishes while people tried to avoid falling into one of the holes in his back yard. Unless he'd filled in those holes. Maybe he'd completed all his landscaping plans and built a deck and everything.

Then Johnny thought of how long it had been and got over himself a little and thought: yeah, no chance. That yard still had holes in it. Someone was definitely going to break an ankle that day.

"John."

“Yeah,” he said hastily. “Of course I am. Wouldn't miss it.”

If Robert thought anything of the long pause, he decided to let it go. “Great,” he said crisply. “So actually, it's not just the Rosé, I think it'd be good if we had some back-up pasta salad – do you think you can stop by that deli on Ventura, you know, the one right before the freeway—”

“Will that even be open?” asked Johnny, dubious.

Robert muttered something disparaging about national holidays, which made Johnny shake his head mutely at the wall. “Okay, just – stop by a Ralphs or something? It's fine. It'll be fine. I'll tell Ash it'll be fine," he said to himself.

“For what it's worth, I really think it will be,” offered Johnny.

Ashley greeted his arrival at the barbecue like someone welcoming a king back from a successful war, the tub of Ralphs pasta salad more prized than gold or glory or whatever it was kings fought for back then.

“You're a life saver, John,” she said fervently, and she was so sincere he couldn't muster any sarcasm about it even in his head. He'd never hosted a barbecue; maybe it was perfectly normal to feel anxiety about side dishes no one was going to enjoy eating anyway.

She directed him to a table just outside the patio door that held beers on ice and then disappeared in search of a serving bowl for the pasta salad. He helped himself to a Sierra Nevada and turned around to survey the scene. It looked almost like a networking event; he immediately felt disloyal to Ashley for the thought.

Tom was already there; he spotted Johnny and waved him over. He was, Johnny was distantly horrified to realize, wearing the same cream-colored polo shirt as him.

Fuck, Johnny needed to go shopping for new clothes. Again. Then he could set fire to everything remaining in his closet and this would never happen ever again. Maybe he should take his shirt off? How weird could that possibly be, standing around shirtless at a barbecue

in the middle of summer. This was Southern California; it was basically their birthright. Or maybe he should tell Tom to take *his* off, so no one thought he was trying to make some kind of display of himself? Except no, Tom would definitely make a stupid joke about John being hot for his body or something equally embarrassing. God, fuck this.

If he was at Daniel's Fourth, he could definitely go shirtless and nobody would care except Daniel, who'd probably be all for it because he liked Johnny making a display of himself. Though if he was at Daniel's, he wouldn't need to go shirtless because he'd be wearing one of his shirts.

Johnny got depressed at the idea of a life where this was his dilemma of the day.

“Nice shirt,” said Tom, smirking at him as he stepped up to join the group.

“Don't you have another one in the car or something you could wear?” Johnny muttered at him sidelong.

He gave him a funny look over his cocktail glass. “Why would I have another shirt in the car?” He shook his shoulders out and tipped his chin at him. Bounced his eyebrows, interrogative. “So, where did you get yours? Was it that Memorial Day sale at Bullock's? It was, wasn't it.”

“Do we have to talk about it?” asked Johnny.

Johnny has known Robert Brown, Sr for most of his life. He had about as much to say to him at twenty-seven as he did at twelve. Unfortunately, most people expect you to have grown a bit in the conversational department by twenty-seven.

“So, John,” said Robert Brown, Sr, “how are things over at Aalders & Bray?”

John did not fidget. “I actually left the company a few weeks ago.” He always wanted to add *sir* to any sentence addressed to the man and not even in a sexy way. It took effort not to do it.

“Oh?” said Robert Brown, Sr politely.

John nodded. Robert Brown, Sr gazed at him. He gazed back. Seconds passed. Robert Brown, Sr's eyebrows lifted fractionally. His did not. Robert Brown, Sr cleared his throat softly. He didn't make a noise.

“...So what are your plans, then?” he asked him eventually.

“I'm contemplating a career change,” admitted Johnny.

“If you're looking for something new, my company's hiring,” Jen told him.

She was the third person to mention a potential job opening. People had fallen upon the topic with something like relief, like they'd felt something was off and once they located the person with the non-compliant life status they had an explanation for why they'd all felt a little itchy. Like he was the grit in the whatever-shouldn't-have-grit.

“The last job I had, I got because of Tom,” said John, because it was basically true, if you went far enough back.

“So?” she asked. She narrowed her eyes. “*What*, I'm just a part of *his* unit, you can't accept help from me because you think it's the same as accepting help from him?”

“I don't want to accept help from anyone,” he said, wishing she'd keep her voice down a little.

She swept him with a quick once-over and gave a half-turn in place, elbow tucked to her side and wine glass up at her mouth; she looked out over the crowd like she was trying to spot someone else to talk to. “You probably wouldn't be a good fit for the computer business, anyway.”

“Probably,” agreed Johnny.

No one at the barbecue wanted to go see some fireworks later. Johnny wasn't surprised, because this wasn't his first Brown family Fourth of July barbecue. But he kept wondering if Daniel was going someplace, and it made him impatient with himself; he didn't get to be someone who pulled Daniel LaRusso back between his legs to lean against his chest while extremely loud explosions went off above their heads, terrifying veterans and dogs across the valley.

“Hey, look,” he said impulsively to Robert and Tom, interrupting whatever they were talking about, which he hadn't been listening to for a while now, because it was really boring, “why don't we do something tonight.”

“Hell yeah,” said Tom instantly.

“No,” said Robert. When they both made noises, he looked between them, annoyed. “Look, I have work first thing—”

“Everyone has work first thing,” said Tom dismissively. He glanced at John. “I mean, besides you.” Johnny shrugged, unbothered. “Rob, no one on the planet is expecting anyone to be productive after a three-day weekend.”

“*One*, I worked half of Saturday, so I didn't have a three-day weekend,” said Robert repressively, “and two—”

“Two, you already deep-sixed whatever you were about to say,” said Johnny loudly. Bobby looked at him, startled, and he added, “I thought you argued for a living, jesus christ. Look, I'm not saying we hit the bars and close some place down in the middle of the night. I just thought,” he didn't know what he'd thought; he was literally making this shit up as he went, “that we could,” his eyes ticked over to Tommy for backup.

“Poker night,” supplied Tom immediately. “Just a quiet, low-key game of cards between a few guys at John's place. Hell, maybe I'll dig up Jimmy's number, invite him. Could be a regular little reunion. Since John didn't show at our actual one.”

Johnny hadn't realized Jimmy still lived in the area. “Sure, sounds good.” He looked at Robert. “Right? Doesn't that sound good?”

Robert hesitated, visibly torn. His eyes crawled past them towards the house and probably his study, where he could bury himself in work and pretend nothing else existed for a while.

“Or I guess I could just go home and sit around alone in my empty apartment,” said Johnny. "Think about how sad my life is, I don't know."

His expression turned faintly incredulous. “Really, Johnny? That's what you're going with?”

“Yeah, guess so,” said Johnny, shrugging.

He was on his way home when he realized he actually had nothing to offer the guys in terms of refreshment or food, and suddenly he understood exactly how Ashley had felt. *Fuck*.

Chapter 89: add it up (if you can)

“Maybe you should go to Vegas,” mused Tom. “I think you could really clean up there with that poker face you got.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” said Johnny, who had a pair of fives. “This is just my face.”

He shrugged and tossed his cards down, folding the hand. “Even better.” He reached for his drink while sliding his gaze over to Robert, expression turning sly. “Should we start setting a timer? At a certain point, this stalling starts to disrupt the dynamics of the game. I almost want to accuse you of cheating.”

“It's not even been *five seconds*,” said Robert tensely. He frowned at his cards. After a moment, he reached up and switched the order, like this would make a critical difference to his hand.

“And last hand it was almost five minutes,” Tom pointed out.

“Your problem is, you're too cavalier. You're sloppy. Do you know what this game comes down to? It's mathematics. Every hand comes with a certain probability and a smart player will weigh that probability against—”

Johnny and Tom both groaned.

“Call and raise you ten,” said Robert quickly, tossing the requisite chips into the center of the table.

Johnny didn't hesitate. “All in.”

He'd barely started to shove his chips towards the center when Robert made a sound of frustration and tossed his cards down. He checked the man's expression and, confirming, shrugged and reversed the motion: dragging his chips and the pot towards himself.

It turned out, Johnny was very good at poker? He felt a little pleased about it in the moment but mostly bemused.

Robert took a drink of his water glass, which was all he'd been drinking for the past hour. “So what did Jimmy say when you called him?” he asked Tom, who shrugged again.

“Not much – they were going to a fireworks show in Burbank, blah

blah, something about the kids. He said he could come next time," he added, "if he has enough of a heads-up."

"What's he do, anyway?" asked Johnny, because that's what you ask. He started shuffling the deck and thought about the idea of a next time.

"He...." Tom narrowed his eyes in thought. He turned to Robert. "What did he say he did?"

Robert started out confidently enough: "He is," but this quickly deflated into, "school administration?"

"No, that was his wife."

"Right, that's right."

They thought about it.

"He might actually stay home with the kids," said Tom, speculative.

"Can you imagine?" said Robert darkly, and he knocked the last of his water back. He looked at the glass afterwards, expression somehow stymied. *Next time,* Johnny thought, he might be persuaded to drink a beer.

"Should we raise the ante?" Johnny asked the table, a moment before there was a loud pounding knock on his door.

He paused, cards in hand. He looked over his shoulder towards the entry hallway. Curious, the other two looked over as well. A moment passed and the knock repeated. Johnny hunched his shoulders and resolutely cut the deck.

"Aren't you going to answer that?" asked Tom, halfway to being amused.

And what was he supposed to say: what if it was the Condo Association woman? She probably didn't take Independence Day off. He wouldn't put it past her. He wondered if the other two had to deal with this kind of shit with their houses. Maybe that's why people bought houses? No one bothering you.

Another knock.

"Oh, for – *answer it*," insisted Robert, swiping the deck of cards from his hands.

Johnny gritted his teeth and shoved his chair back. He walked away from the table, eyeing the door the whole length of the hallway. But even his suspicion could not prepare him for what he saw through the peephole at the end of it.

He drew back and thought about not answering.

“I saw the light change in the door,” declared the loud woman outside. “Open up, asshole!”

“Is that *Susan*?” called Tom back in the dining room.

Johnny wasn't one to speak, obviously, but he kind of thought Tom was a little pathetic; like, he really needed to let it go already. Even if he didn't know about her being a lesbo, he was married. Johnny heard somewhere that was supposed to mean something.

He heaved a not-sigh and opened the door a crack; Susan had her hand up, poised to knock again. When he met her eyes, she flashed a wide smile of deep insincerity and bright red lipstick and dropped the hand with a flourish, tucking it behind her back. She put her head to the side and considered him.

“Well, what?” he said, like she came by every day. “What is it?”

“What *is* it?” she echoed flatly. He just looked at her, but she seemed to quickly lose patience with that game. She put her head back and said, “Let me in. I want to talk to you.”

His hand shifted its grip on the door. “I'm kind of busy.”

“Busy?” she said. She tossed her head as if her hair wasn't pinned tightly in victory curls and said with a sort of uncalled-for scorn, “Doing *what*, jerking off?”

His narrowed his eyes. “Why would I answer the door if I was jerking off?”

She didn't reply except to go for the opening and then it was a choice between brutally shoving the human equivalent of a kitten in an American flag-styled pinup dress and slamming the door or letting the pest inside, and if Johnny had been alone he might've made a different decision but – Tom had already recognized her voice, anyway. It was all over before it began.

Whatever. How bad could this be.

He stood at the darkened end of the hallway after shutting the door and watched her star-spangled A-line skirt disappear around the corner into the other room. Robert and Tom both greeted her gamely and he thought: bad, very bad.

Chapter 90

When he first awoke in that place, it was dark and quiet, like the world was hiding as a predator stalked down the hours.

His head hurt. Something was wrong with his face – a pressure, a weight, stiffness when he tried to move it. He couldn't smell anything because he couldn't breathe through his nose without a sharply stinging pain, but his limbs still worked; he stretched his fingers out and felt around beneath him. Cool silk answered his touch. No.

Terry, he said – or tried to, but his voice came out in raspy croak. His throat was very dry. He tipped his head back against the pillow and sucked in a long breath, swallowing painfully. He wet his lips and tried again, and then Terry was there.

“You're awake earlier than I expected,” he murmured.

The mattress dipped slightly at John's hip where the man sank down, and then a curtain of soft hair fell past his face as Terry leaned over to inspect him. It was too dark to make out his expression, but John thought the other man had no such trouble. A sigh gusted over his pained face.

His hand fumbled over, clumsily reaching – his arm weighted like his veins were full of mercury. He tried to grab Terry, to push or pull he didn't even know. He was so tired. His mind bristled and panicked as he realized: he was so, so tired. This wasn't natural.

“You always did have such a high tolerance to opioids,” said Terry, tone on the edge of chiding. He folded a hand over John's forehead like a mother checking her child's temperature. “I'll have to up your dosage. Can't have you flailing around and doing more damage to yourself.”

No, he tried to say, but the voice was still gone. He was so thirsty.

Terry captured his hand in his own and clasped it tight. John's vision adjusted enough to see that wide mouth spread in a tender smile.

“Don't worry, John,” he said. “I'll take care of you.”

And then he did something that made John's vision smear and spark and it was too late, the world was gone; the predator had found him

and was holding his hand.

Time didn't pass in Terry's house so much as hover.

John dreamed of the jungle: a line of trees stretching out towards the horizon, lighting the sky like the rising sun as they were engulfed in flames.

He dreamed of the cage: 6 by 10 feet, and all the walls porous so there was nowhere safe to sit. Later, he gave his students a mirror to check their form but also, he gave his students a mirror so they knew the world had boundaries, was made up of hard edges; so they might start to understand some of those hard edges could look like them.

He dreamed of the pit: the sound the snakes had made, a chorus of hissing rising up all around him like he was standing in the middle of an amphitheater. It filled his ears. He had to fight to hear anything else for a long time afterwards. Such an insidious sound for a mind to imprint on; such a simple sound for the mind to reproduce. When they were still young men and shared a home and a bed because it was economical, Terry would sometimes roll over in the night and whisper softly in his ear. But all John heard was the hiss.

He dreamed of Johnny Lawrence – or maybe he thought about him when awake? He couldn't quite tell the difference anymore.

Twig sat tousle-haired and bare-chested in a cramped bed in a dingy rented room in Saigon. He watched with unblinking black eyes as John went through the moves. John talked on his exhalations, sketching quick plans for them both: a whole future of ideas. Twig was smiling.

John finished and wiped his forehead with an elbow and looked back quizzically. “What?”

Twig put out an arm, beckoning, and John did him one better and used it to pull and roll him beneath his body, sheltering it against the hot, scratchy sheets. Twig laughed, his ribcage trembling under John's

chest.

“Why does this mean so much to you?” he asked, words creeping up into a gasp as John felt between their bodies and hooked a finger inside him. He tried to spread his legs, but John kept them together easily with the simple press of his knees.

He looked down at the head of short dark hair, the torso of straight lines leading to squirming, narrow hips, all of it so undeniably male it made something in his stomach twist and seethe even now.

“In the cage,” he said, breathless but trying to hide it, “you couldn't stand up. Everything was on the line and you – you couldn't even stand up.”

Twig stopped moving against him. John smoothed a hand down his spine, reassuring. He glanced and saw Twig's eyes were fixed forward across the plane of the bed, still and sightless.

He gentled his tone and his touch. “It's okay, Terry. It's okay. I'll take care of you.”

By the time he sank into him, Twig was flexing again, desperate for it, for him. John dragged a hand up through his hair, and he strained back towards the grip like he thought it was a leash and he wanted to be good.

“We're going to help people, Terry,” he told him afterwards, after he'd fucked him into a boneless pile of useless, lanky limbs. He ran his hand through his hair again, watching as Twig shut his eyes tight. “We're going to help people stand up.”

Eventually John woke up and stayed awake and the world was once more legible, familiar.

The mirror in the bathroom adjoining his room showed him a face that looked like it had been put through an industrial cement mixer. The bruising around his eyes had gone down enough for him to see and what he saw in his own eyes was undeniable – defeat. At last, defeat.

He found the robe waiting on a hook beside the door of the room. It was thin cotton, a plain dark blue. John put it on and went out.

He walked barefoot through the corridors of portraits and sculpture Terry liked to litter his place with. Once, a servant crossed his path. He didn't look at John or acknowledge he was there in anyway. John paused and turned on the fine tile and let him pass, watching the man's uniformed back closely until he disappeared on the other side of the hall.

So was that to be it, then? Terry wanted a ghost?

He let himself outside and took a seat on the patio. (*Loggia*, Terry said once and the correction hadn't burned at first because he'd been going to his knees on that beautiful loggia, and John was a little distracted. But he'd thought about it later, looking around that massive, ridiculous estate. He'd thought: I don't belong here.)

He set his knees wide beneath the beautiful arches sheltering the gallery and gazed out over the edge to the hanging greenery and the sky beyond. This high up, you could tell yourself the smog hanging over Los Angeles on a bad day was merely weather; breathing in air fragrant with flowers, it was almost possible to believe it.

Terry found him eventually. He always did.

Johnny sat on a bench in the locker room of the gym, naked as a Greek Olympian. When John walked over to stand before him, he didn't move except to tip his head back and meet his eyes, beatifically acquiescent.

John told him to extend the arm that was bothering him and raise it to shoulder height and then pretend to pour a glass out. Johnny obeyed. He stopped when John put a hand on the arm at the elbow.

“Resist,” he ordered, and he pressed down. He watched the boy's face. “Any pain?”

Johnny shook his head. “No, don't think so.”

“Okay.” John retained possession of the arm and pressed it back so it bent at the elbow. He braced the boy's shoulder and pressed the elbow to his waist. “Make a fist. Okay: resist.” He put pressure on the arm, carefully pressing it inward towards his chest. Warm muscle pressed back beneath his palms, denying. “Well?”

Those blue eyes blinked and narrowed a little in thought. “Maybe? I – I don't know.”

John dropped the arm but kept a hand on his shoulder for a moment longer. “You should know the difference between the usual pain of a workout and a real injury, Mr. Lawrence.”

Johnny finally let his mouth curl a little and he shrugged the shoulder beneath his hand. He widened his eyes a little, shining innocence no less potent because he knew how to use it and said, “But how? I've never been injured before.”

“Yes, you've been very lucky,” he said dryly.

John took his hand away and stepped back and refused to see the boy's reaction to the retracted touch. He was well-practiced at it by now; a worse man might not have developed such selective blindness. A worse manager might have decided he could use what he saw, if all he cared about was himself.

He leaned against the locker bank and folded his arms. “I don't think it's the rotator cuff. Keep icing it, get some rest. We'll keep an eye on it.”

Johnny nodded and broke off staring. He rubbed the sore arm idly, fingers working up and down the length of it.

When he spoke again, his voice was quiet and soft in a way John still hadn't found the words to fix. “Sensei?”

John should've done it years ago, but he honestly thought the boy would grow out of it. But no, here he was at twenty. Sounding like that. Thank fuck he was shy enough to have nothing to say to most people.

“Do you really think I can beat Pinetti?”

John blinked out of his thoughts and focused again on the fighter sitting before him: the perfect proportioned muscles in his arms and legs, the still steadiness of his gaze. Between the two of them, they had built a champion. Never mind the rest, this was what mattered. So long as John cut the path clear and Johnny worked hard, that would remain true. He believed that the way he hadn't believed anything since he first joined the army.

“Johnny, I think you were born to win,” he told him honestly. “This

was what you were meant for. I hope you never forget that."

Johnny at twenty; seventeen; twelve. The smile said the same thing.

He'd loved John.

Terry sank into the chair beside his and crossed his long legs. A bare ankle peeked out at John. He was in a silk gi and he smelled like he'd been working hard.

"I heard you were up," he said. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've lost everything," said John.

Terry reached to the table between their chairs and poured two glasses of ice water. "Don't be so dramatic, John. You still have Cobra Kai, after all. I thought you'd be happy."

John accepted the glass but did not drink from it. He stared narrowly over at him, all instincts on high alert. "What are you talking about?"

Terry toasted him lightly and downed his water in one go; his throat moved only the once. After he smacked his lips and looked around the loggia in satisfaction. He seemed pleased at the sight of everything his eyes lit upon, and the pleasure only grew when he looked back at John.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded again.

"Our bet," said Terry simply. His smile grew, but his eyes remained unchanged. "You won," he added needlessly.

John's hand curled hard around the glass. He nearly threw it across the gallery. "Enough with the jokes. You're trying to say you arranged for everything? The boy finding you, showing up here before me – you expect me to believe that was all your doing? Is such a thing even possible?"

He settled back into his chair and clasped his hands together. "I arranged for some of it, certainly. The rest was pure Serendipity, whose judgment I am more than happy to accept – after all, it's what brought us together in the first place, wasn't it? Why shouldn't it bring us together again?"

“Stop babbling,” he said harshly. “You know damn well that mess wasn't what we agreed upon when we made that bet."

Terry looked at him patiently. “Of course it was. Your fighter against mine. You know you've always been my champion, John.”

He was too content by half for John to buy it. There was something else going on here. Him handing Cobra Kai back like it was even his to give. Months of fighting and back to where they'd stood before? Except, no. John wasn't the same man he had been before. He'd lost something in that room with Johnny. And they both knew it.

He was silent for a long time.

“So you're going to make ask for it after all, aren't you,” he said and in the corner of his vision, he saw Terry go still, the casual dance of his foot along the ball of his ankle pausing.

Terry sounded like he was picking his words very carefully. “You wanted to give it to me, but you hated yourself for it. I thought maybe you needed to have no choice. That, you could respect. Defeat at last. To be honest, I think part of you has been longing for it since you kicked our commanding officer into that snake pit.”

“So what,” he said unsteadily. “You changed your mind?”

“Let's just say you tested my patience. I have my pride too, John. But I'm satisfied it has all worked out for the best now.”

John swallowed hard and stared down at his hands. They looked just like always; he hadn't had a chance to raise them defensively even once during the attack. He'd trained Johnny well. His beautiful strong champion. What a waste. This was worse than the miscalculation with the boy's mother. This felt permanent.

He couldn't stop seeing Johnny's expression, that alien contortion of rage. The longer he thought about it, the louder a hissing grew in his ears – but that must just be the breeze in the tree branches.

“Why couldn't you just let it go?” he asked bitterly at last. *Why couldn't you let me go.*

“John,” said Terry with compassion. He leaned forward to rest a hand on his arm, like someone comforting the bereaved. “You called me.”

Chapter 91: (stop asking how i'm) spending my time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You want to play?” asked Tom.

“Sure,” said Susan.

“No, she's not staying,” said Johnny and to her: "are you."

She gave him an unimpressed look and sat down – in his chair. “That all depends on you, I think.” She looked around the table. “So, what are we playing? Poker? Boring. How about Euchre?”

“Sure,” said Tom.

“*No*,” said Johnny.

“I don't know how to play,” admitted Robert.

“It involves teams,” she said brightly and she snagged the deck from in front of him and flipped it over to start weeding out the unnecessary cards. “How about Tommy and me and you and Johnny?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Tom, and he stood to refill his glass. “I didn't even know you played cards.”

“Oh, sure. We went through a phase right after high school.” She kept weeding and looked up at Johnny, who had not given in yet and sat back down at the table.

“Who, the girls? And did that – did that include Daniel LaRusso?” And Tom snickered a little in what sounded like a bout of pure instinct. He cut himself off a second later.

Susan's eyes gleamed as she cocked her head and stared Johnny down. “Sure did.”

Tom coughed lightly. “Uh, sorry, Johnny.”

Susan shuffled the deck a few times and then rapped it sharply down on the table before extending the pack to Johnny: her manicured pink-

tipped hand a generous platter. “Well? You going to cut?”

He glanced around the table and briefly met Robert's curious eyes. His lips thinned and reached out, pinched off the top third of the cards and slapped them down on the table before turning to grab a fourth chair.

“I guess it's game on,” said Susan behind him, satisfied. “Okay, Bobby – in Euchre, you can't communicate with your partner, by the way. You just have to hope they received good cards. Now, if you're the dealer and are confident in *your* hand, you can choose to go alone, and then Johnny will have to sit out the hand. Um – right, so the suits —”

And she continued explaining what sounded like a stupid game of luck while Johnny got himself another beer. He didn't like her tone and he didn't trust her intentions.

He slumped down to her left and waited for her to strike.

“So, you boys talk about it at all?” she asked when the dealing had gone around the table once and she had the cards again. She dealt Johnny three cards, Tom two, Robert three, and herself two.

“Talk about what?” asked Tom, watching her hands move as she continued to deal Johnny two cards, him three, Robert two, and herself three.

“What happened with John Kreese.” She flipped the top card of the kitty: ace of clubs.

“Pass,” said Johnny tonelessly. “And no, we haven't. We're trying to have fun here.” He was trying *so* hard to have fun; did other people have to try this hard?

“There's not much to talk about,” said Tom. “Okay, yes – pick that up, girl.”

She picked up the ace and discarded one of her cards. “Right, what's there to talk about. Johnny here nearly killed the guy who used to teach all of you as kids, but sure. I can see how that topic might feel a

little stale. It was a couple weeks ago. Who can look away from OJ, anyway?"

Johnny clenched his jaw and did his best to ignore her. He slapped his king of hearts down.

Tom put down a ten of hearts; Bobby a nine. Susan had no heart and took the hand with the queen trump. The rest of the round went by quickly, as the other team collected all five tricks, to Johnny and Robert's quiet disgust.

Susan smiled sidelong at Johnny, close-mouthed, and shoved the deck towards him.

He gathered the cards and shuffled, thinking. He didn't want to talk about anything in front of the guys, but he also figured she wouldn't leave until she got to say whatever it is she thought he needed to hear. He had a guess about what that was about, but also, he didn't know why she was bothering.

He remembered her reaction in Silver's house that day. She couldn't possibly want anything to do with him after that, or want that for Daniel.

"Look, I didn't see it," said Tom, as Johnny dealt out a new hand. "And I won't pretend I really understand anything that's going on with Sensei Kreese. But he probably deserved it? Even he would admit that, he was a straight-up guy about that kind of thing. I mean, it's what he taught. Either you're strong enough to take the hits or you get out of the way."

"How *is* Dutch doing with prison?" asked Susan keenly.

Tom grinned at her. "Paying his debt to society, which is more than you or I can say."

Robert shifted in his seat, disgruntled. He met Johnny's eyes and shook his head a little and shrugged. He didn't want to talk about it either.

"Is that why you came here?" asked Johnny. "Because you wanted to lecture us? Don't bother – I'm not planning on fighting again. That's all over." Someday, if he lives long enough, he might barely remember he was ever a fighter. He wished the thought didn't make him hope it was all over sooner rather than later.

“Actually, I don't really care about that,” she said honestly.

“Then why are you here?” He flipped the top card on the pile: nine of hearts.

“Pass,” said Tom.

“Pick it up,” said Robert.

Johnny glanced up at him, eyes crinkled. “*Really*?”

“Hey, no table talk,” said Susan.

Johnny shot her a look and picked up the card. He looked at his hand a moment and discarded the jack of clubs.

“Okay, I'll just say it, since talking to you is like trying to get emotion from a photo in a magazine—”

“That's the point of photos,” Tom pointed out, but Susan shushed him. He shrugged and lay down the queen of spades; Robert immediately laid down the queen of hearts.

“*I* think, you don't drop in on someone's life like you're playing house,” she said loftily, “string them along, using them for room and board—”

“I wasn't *using* him for room and board,” said Johnny. “I offered to pay rent, for fuck's sake.”

“He doesn't need you to pay rent. I'm paying rent.”

“No, you're not,” he said hotly, because he remembered a conversation or five about that.

“Well, I will as soon as I can figure out how to make him accept it along with my recommendations on interior design. That's not the point.” And, as if to punctuate said point, she tossed her cards down, face-up.

Robert said, “Hey, that's – damn it. My hand was red,” he added, to no one.

“Christ, are we seriously talking about LaRusso right now?” said Tom.

“Shut up,” snapped Susan and Johnny. He put his hands up and sat back in his chair.

“It's none of your business,” said Johnny. He wished they weren't talking about this in front of other people, but she seemed to relish it. And he knew it just wasn't done, grabbing a woman and dragging her from a room, and he wasn't going to, but just then it seemed really unfair.

“Daniel is my business,” she shot back. “That's how friends work, asshole. You made him think you cared about him and then you flaked.”

“That's not what happened. We just,” Tom was sitting *right there*, “it didn't work out, but that's not.” He stopped and took a short breath. He set his teeth. “Daniel knows. He understands.”

She made a polite sound of understanding. “Oh, he does, does he? Is that why I just came from the most depressing beach get-together since Gregory Peck died of radiation poisoning?”

His face twisted. “What?”

“You never actually see him die,” said Robert. He was still frowning at his cards, but he looked uncomfortable. "I mean, pretty sure."

Susan ignored him. “Things don't work out sometimes, fine. I mean – it's you, what a shocker, right. You screw people up even when you're not there—”

“Hey,” said Robert, sharp. “Take it easy.”

She didn't look away from Johnny. “You didn't have to make him think you didn't care.”

He'd told Daniel – he *told* him that he wasn't – he said sorry and all the things you were supposed to say. How could Daniel still be feeling that bad over him? Like she said: it was Johnny, after all.

“It's not that simple,” he said. “It's not like with you and – and your friend. We can't just go on, pretending everything's fine and normal. There is no normal.”

“Who's he talking about?” asked Tom, too interested. Susan ignored him too.

“It's different with Daniel and me. We've never been friends.”

“You've never tried, either,” she said, proving to him she really didn't

get it.

“He did,” began Robert, and he cleared his throat and shifted in his seat, eyes going back to the winning hand he'd never get to play. He gestured with his free hand before folding it over his chin and saying, stiffly, “he did seem to... care about you.”

He stared across at him, trying not to feel betrayed. He thought Robert, of all people, would understand: if you can't do something right, you shouldn't do it at all. Didn't they teach that in the Eagle Scouts or whatever? The idea of seeing Daniel and pretending to be casual about him was unthinkable; it would feel like ending things all over again. It would feel like death.

“When did *you* talk to LaRusso?” Tom asked Robert, meanwhile. He looked around at them all. “Am I the only person here who hasn't had a heart-to-heart with that guy?” He paused, expression wrinkling in distaste. “Do I need to?”

“What are you suggesting?” Johnny asked Susan, momentarily defeated.

She smiled, triumphant. “Well, you're not training anymore, right? So – drinks Friday?”

“Now we're talking!” said Tom.

“You're not coming,” Johnny told him.

Chapter End Notes

I may have accidentally written Tuning as an AU where people commonly play euchre outside of the great lakes region? if that's the case, I apologize.

Chapter 92: here comes your man (or not)

He did a pretty good job not thinking about it for the rest of the week.

He took the bike out and went on long runs along the coast. He called Dutch and got the low-down on a feud that was happening between some of the inmates on his block; it sounded pretty stupid. He went shopping for a new TV and VCR and had to pay stupid amount to get them both delivered; he also bought some more clothes – shirts too this time. He dared to venture into Media City Center, giving Macy's a wide berth, to check out the music store. He looked at the Classifieds everyday, though he didn't circle anything to follow up on, not yet. Not yet. (Soon, though.)

Slowly, he started to gain the habits and appearance of a person, even if he had no idea what that person was. It felt forced and a little fake, and involved a lot of shopping? But it passed the time.

He got a giant Guns N Roses poster for his living room wall. Slash was shirtless and practically fucking his guitar. It was kind of great, that he could just turn around and see it whenever he wanted.

Friday, around five, he finally let himself look at the idea of seeing Daniel in a few hours.

What should he say to him? Johnny looked back on the couple weeks he's had and nothing offers itself up for ready conversation with normal people. Daniel was going to take one look at him and realize with relief he was glad Johnny left. That was why Johnny was going to this thing, right? To show him what he shouldn't be missing.

It was the least he could do.

He took a shower and shaved. Looked at the mirror and thought about cutting his hair, which was now regularly threatening to blind him completely; ignored this impulse for the moment and raked it back with his fingers, deliberately chose to forget about it.

He hadn't asked Susan what kind of place they were going to, but if it was anything like that tiki bar they went to last month, he figured he'd be okay with a pair of jeans and a Van Halen tee (1980 World

Invasion tour; a reproduction, which bothered him intensely, but he'd already resolved to go see them at the next opportunity and fix this issue).

He considered calling a taxi, but he couldn't stand the thought of sitting around waiting only to sit around in a car waiting some more. He wanted some measure of control over the night and the best kind always came with a thrum of a powerful engine between his legs. So he took the bike.

The address of the bar was in LA proper, a neighborhood he'd never been in before. It was fairly busy and dark and kind of glamorous from the outside, and Johnny immediately realized he was not dressed even close to appropriately for it. What the hell. Was this Susan's idea of a joke?

“Lucky Penny.”

He turned and caught the ankle attached to a foot inches from his face: an expertly-aimed, barely-pulled side kick. Chozen grinned at him and retracted his leg.

“Good kick,” said Johnny. What he meant was good control, but that was more or less the same thing.

“Good reflexes,” replied Chozen, and he glanced at the bar. “Are you waiting for someone or going inside?”

“I – going inside, I guess,” he said. “Except I'm not really,” dressed right, he suddenly could not make himself say.

Sure, Chozen was wearing a red silk shirt that sat close to his pecs and bare arms and floated just enough around his waist to hint at the athletic taper of his torso, and sure, a lot of the people going inside the bar seemed to be similarly dressed up, and *sure*, Johnny had half a dozen outfits still at home that would have been more suitable, but none of this was his problem. What the hell did he care what people inside that bar thought? That's not why he was here.

Chozen waited.

“Yeah, let's go in,” he told him.

Inside, it became immediately apparent it was a gay bar. The shitty music was the first clue – Madonna? Grown men dancing to Madonna? Why. He was trying so hard to be okay with his sexuality

and shit and then people have to go and make it harder.

The second was the amount of skin on display. Johnny automatically looked away from more than one ass or half-hard cock displayed lovingly in a pair of tight trousers before remembering he was allowed to look; before remembering he wasn't here for that; before deciding he could multitask.

Chozen pressed two fingers to the middle of his spine and steered him through the dense crowd. “You are rubbernecking.”

“That's, what? That doesn't mean what you think it means,” Johnny said over the music.

Chozen indicated a talkative table of tipsy twinks and said in his ear, “Driver staring at terrible mess on the side of the road, yes?”

And while Johnny tried to decide if this was some kind of a cultural misunderstanding or if Chozen was actually just being fantastically catty, they arrived at a circular booth holding people they knew: Ali, Susan, and he was pretty sure her name was Vicki and—

Daniel.

The others greet Chozen and might spare a word for Johnny as well, but he isn't really listening.

Daniel is sitting at the end of the booth, body rotated ninety degrees to lean out of it as some guy tries to chat him up; he seems to be tolerating this with polite patience, judging from the half-expression Johnny can see in his profile. He wonders why the man is still trying after getting a look like this; maybe he is dumb. Or maybe he saw a pair of pretty eyes and that mouth and couldn't help but go for it.

Daniel is unfussy in a dark button-down with an open collar and folded sleeves. He has one hand crooked up, caging the mouth of a round whiskey glass. Every two seconds or so, his index finger rises a little and taps the edge and he gives the man a small, absent nod.

Something in the precise pitch and tone of the girls' greetings drags him from the routine. Johnny stands still as his gaze slides over and finds him.

He stares at Johnny, no longer seeming to hear or remember the presence of the man at his side. His gaze shifts over his face and then slips down to take in Johnny's T-shirt; his mouth curls into a small,

fond smile.

And Johnny is so fucked.

“Don't think I've seen you without any bruises before,” Daniel murmurs, leaning presumptuously across the seat into Johnny's space like he needs to serve him a smile or it's not legally binding. “It's a good look on you, Johnny.”

So: Daniel is already kind of drunk.

Johnny leans in, body an invitation. He tracks the man's hand as it charts a course for his shoulder. “Yeah? You like it?” he asks, low, because he is only human and this is the best he's felt in weeks.

Daniel smiles and huffs a satisfied (drunk) laugh behind his pinched lips. His hand sketches a circle over the ball of Johnny's shoulder and drifts down his arm. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.” (Maybe really drunk?)

His hand folds over Johnny's wrist and he tugs with surprising strength – Johnny has to stop himself from swaying towards him, mostly because he thinks he won't be able to stop if he lets himself go.

Susan is watching them from further in the booth. He looks away from her narrow gaze and briefly meets Ali's wide, curious eyes and *nope*, not thinking about that. Flushing, he returns his attention to Daniel, who is now scrutinizing Johnny's lap intently like he is trying to work out if he'd fit between him and the table. (He wouldn't, but then, he wouldn't have to try; Johnny could get on the table and pull Daniel down over him—)

Johnny clears his throat. “So, uh. How – how've you been?”

Daniel sighs soundlessly and takes his wandering hand away in order to reach for his glass. “Oh, I'm fantastic. No longer pulling those swing shifts. Got my house all to myself again – you're gone, Chozen's fucking off to shoot some movie... Susan's apparently abandoning me for Denver as well—”

“I'm not moving to Denver, you melodramatic twerp,” says Susan loudly. “I'm tagging along with Ali as she checks out the campus.”

“I would also like to remind you the Denver thing isn't a done deal for

me either," Ali puts in.

"I'd move to Denver in a heartbeat," says maybe-Vicki. "Anything to get out of LA. Soon as I get my doctorate I'm moving somewhere crazy. Like Maine. Did you know there's a city in Maine where you can just walk everywhere?"

"Isn't that every city in Maine? Because they're like five blocks and two hundred people?" says Susan, unimpressed.

"*See*, even Vicki's leaving," says Daniel, flapping an arm; Vicki apparently has good reflexes and leans backwards, out of his path. He flattens his mouth in a mirthless smile, which he directs towards Johnny with a devastating false brightness. "So, yeah, everything is going great."

Johnny watches him take a large drink of his whiskey. "I thought you wanted your house to yourself again."

"Yeah, I did – I do." He nods heavily down at the table. "I've got it all worked out. I'm going to finally landscape my backyard, put up a better, bigger fence. Plant some trees and flowers that will bloom all through the year. And when that's all done, I'll – I dunno, maybe I'll take up fishing or something. A man can never have too many hobbies," he says decisively.

Johnny thinks that all sounds pretty nice, so he doesn't understand the strange look in Daniel's eyes as he stares down at his whiskey glass.

He shifts in place, uncertain and out of his depth. He's not equipped for this.

A moment later, Daniel finishes his drink and announces he's going to get another, but instead of asking Johnny to let him out, he wriggles down in the seat like a man limbo-ing into a sewer grate.

"What the fuck?" says Johnny, jumping and pressing his legs back against the booth.

Daniel emerges from beneath the table and straightens up, expression blankly haughty. He tosses his head to get his hair out of his eyes and marches off towards the bar without a backwards look.

Johnny looks at the others, wordlessly questioning.

Susan tugs an earlobe. "He got here before everyone else. Don't know

how long he was waiting.”

Chapter 93: (you're so) hard to handle

“It is good you came,” says Chozen a while later, when the girls and Daniel have all vacated the booth in favor of dancing, Daniel without so much as a backwards look. “We were not sure you would.”

Johnny sucks glumly on the last of Ali's abandoned margarita; he hits slush and frowns, stabbing the straw through the drink to root out more flavor. “Yeah, well. Susan said he was really upset,” he says, though the longer he sits here, the less he is sure he can do anything about that.

And anyway, Daniel doesn't *look* upset at the moment; he's swinging Vicki energetically across the floor and generally making a complete nuisance of himself among the couples of men trying to grind off on one another. Of course Daniel is as bad at being gay as he was at being straight back in school, of course he is.

“Upset?” says Chozen. Johnny blinks at him and he hastily adds, “Ah, yes, yes. Very upset. Inconsolable. He weeps into his noodles—”

“Great, so he doesn't even care?” Johnny says, embarrassed but refusing to examine how heavy the alcohol is suddenly sitting in his stomach. He vindictively reaches for Susan's cocktail. “Why did Susan drag me out here, then?”

Chozen puts his head back and narrows his eyes in thought. “Daniel-san says you are from wasps. Is this true? *Wasps?*”

“I have no idea,” says Johnny, bewildered.

Chozen shrugs. “He says wasps do not understand some things, like sex and love and friendship and kindness and culture and—”

His cheeks burn. “What the hell?” So now Daniel has been bad-mouthing him?

“We sent Susan because she is most persuasive,” says Chozen. He grunts a little and starts sliding along the long curve of the booth, saying over his shoulder, “Daniel-san misses you, it's true. But we all do. Did you not miss us?”

And then with cinematic precision, he abandons Johnny to sit alone at the table and walks out onto the dance floor. He looks around briefly

and puts out a commanding hand; a few seconds later, a twink materializes like a homing pigeon and falls into his arms, and together they spin away into the crowd.

“How does he do that?” mutters Johnny, to pass a few devastating seconds.

He refuses to try and dance because he can envision about a dozen different ways *that* ends in humiliation. He tries to not look extremely awkward and obvious, sitting alone at a corner booth meant for a large group, but he gathers from a couple passing people he doesn't really succeed. He is uncomfortable and kind of bored, and what the hell.

The last time he was in a place like this, it was a lot more simple. He sat at the bar drinking until someone caught his eye and then they went into the backroom and Johnny sucked him off; easy. The idea of using this same type of space to dance and chat and generally hang out is completely alien to him.

Some time later, Ali emerges from the dance floor and collapses with great relief sideways into the long booth. She reaches up to pat her hair into place: the vestigial instinct of one used to longer hair. When her hand finds nothing amiss, she laughs a little, almost giddy, and leans up on one elbow. She looks around to share the laugh; finding only Johnny, she somehow doesn't change her mind.

“I may never grow my hair out again,” she confesses. “Short hair is so *easy*. I must save at least twenty minutes out of every day. What other secrets are men keeping to themselves?” she asks Johnny.

“Yeah, I guess it's pretty convenient,” he says.

“Maybe I should go all the way, really commit.” He raises an eyebrow and she elaborates, “shave my head.”

“If you do, you have to let me be there when you show your mom,” he says seriously and she laughs again.

“You should get out there,” she says, nodding to the floor.

“You know the only dance I know,” he reminds her.

Her nose wrinkles as she grins. “That wasn't dancing, not really. Anyway, look. There's no right or wrong way to dance.”

“That's not true,” he says. “Daniel is definitely doing it wrong.”

On the dance floor, Daniel is currently performing The Swim; Ali stops frowning in puzzlement at her empty margarita glance and looks over in time to see him plug his nose and go for the gold in embarrassing his friends.

Her mouth forms a delicate *o* shape. “At this rate, he's going to end the night trying to take over DJing or decide everyone wants to see him dance on top of the bar.”

Johnny wouldn't mind seeing him dance on top of the bar if he didn't think Daniel would try to Moon Walk right off the edge. But then, maybe he could catch him? Then he could at least be useful.

“Hey,” says Ali suddenly, shoving up to sit normally. Her hand moves to tuck hair that is not long enough to be tucked behind her ear. “Um, look – I'm sorry about your teacher.”

Johnny shifts, uncomfortable. “Oh. Right.” He clears his throat. “I'm sorry you had to see all that.”

Back in school, he'd always unthinkingly used Ali as a gauge – she had never once looked scared of him? That made it all the more funny or ridiculous when someone else *was* – when it was Daniel. If someone as good as Ali could see Johnny for who he really was, then wasn't it everyone else's fault when they couldn't? Why would he try to make it easier for them? Why would he try to make it easier for Ali after she stopped?

Why would he try to face what they all saw instead of what Sensei's mirror showed?

“I should've known better than to trust him,” he says. “Even back then, you always said Cobra Kai was no good. But I didn't want to hear it.”

She doesn't disagree with him, just twists her mouth a little and nods. He looks back at the dance floor; Daniel has disappeared.

“You know, there's nothing wrong with wanting someone's love and respect,” she says. She grabs her empty glass and starts scooting out of the booth, sending a wry smile back his way. “Just maybe – choose a better someone?”

The deafening noise of the club seems to descend again the moment

she leaves. He endures it for only another thirty or so seconds before giving up and dragging himself out of the booth as well.

He finds Daniel standing near the bar, his attention seemingly intently focused on waiting for an opening to appear. Johnny walks up behind him and lets his head drop down, forehead finding his shoulder.

He feels Daniel's head turn slightly, his cheek dragging against his hair as he checks the identity of his burden. Daniel huffs a laugh.

“Are you going to sleep or are you trying to ask me to dance?” he asks.

Johnny is *not* asking him to dance – he doesn't even recognize the song playing right now. He hasn't recognized most of the songs, actually. But somehow what he ends up saying is, “Only if you lead.”

Daniel turns around, forcing him to lift his head and meet his eyes. And Johnny's not – he's not promising anything, here. He's just a little tired of watching Daniel smile and laugh and not having anything to do with it.

Daniel is flushed from dancing and the heat of the crowd, his face under the shifting lights glinting in sweat. Up close, he looks less fantastically cheerful than he had while moving on the floor; his eyes are pinched at the corners, the curve of his mouth a little harder, a little more weary.

“It's just,” says Johnny, completely out of his element, “I don't know how to dance.”

Someone turns away from the bar, hands full of drinks. Daniel doesn't look over and another person fills the gap in seconds. The current song ends and blends into the start of another, one with energetic drums and synthesizer.

“There's nothing to know,” says Daniel, over the intro. He's still just standing there, looking at Johnny. “Just listen to the music and let yourself move.”

Johnny listens to the music for a few beats and shakes his head. “That's what everyone always says. But this isn't really my kind of music.” And he hopes it doesn't sound like defeat to the other man; that maybe him standing there might be enough, for the moment.

Daniel watches him another few seconds before he looks away,

shaking his head; his expression breaks into a smile that looks almost self-deprecating. But his hand finds Johnny's wrist and then he's pulling him away from the bar, out onto the crowded dance floor.

The lights overhead continue their disorienting strobe and all around them, bodies move – sinuous, flashing, jumping. Johnny breathes in and out and focuses on Daniel, and somehow the movement shifts, and then the music too: it's still just bright noise to him, but maybe it has a rhythm.

Daniel's eyes dart over him. He takes hold of Johnny's hips. The world changes and time slips to allow it.

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   constituent.daniel
hey, there.

   constituent.johnny
hi.
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Chapter 94: (he remains one) sexy m.f.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He woke up all at once, awareness thrashing up out of the deep to clutch at the jagged shore of reality and oh what, oh god, what?

Johnny shoved up on his elbows. He stared down at the richly-appointed king-size bed he was lying on and then rolled over to stare around the unfamiliar bedroom he was lying in. He had no idea where he was, or what had happened to lead him here. His head felt like he'd left it mothballed half a lifetime ago and came back to find it smaller than he remembered and all the wiring on the fritz. His eyes burned, his mouth was dry.

Where was Daniel?

He had a terrible thought and fumbled for the sheet, ripping it off to see – boxers. Okay. (God, he stunk, it was practically coming out of his pores, sweat and liquor and had he bummed a cigarette off someone in the club at some point? What the fuck.)

The walls were a robin's egg blue and trimmed in white. There was a large painting on one wall: a landscape of rolling green hills edged by an ocean. It could be deeply personal or it could be stock art from an institutional supplier, Johnny didn't know anything about art.

There were three doors, all closed. Johnny listened for a moment and, hearing nothing, rolled out the bed.

He fell to the floor. His left leg was asleep.

He grimaced and poked and pounded it with his fist until the deadness was replaced with numbness was replaced with the uncomfortable prickling of nerves reconnecting. God, he really needed a shower. And a gallon of water. And to know what the fuck happened last night.

He was at the club with the others. He'd approached Daniel, who'd dragged him onto the dance floor, and they'd danced and....

He couldn't remember. He felt sick.

Once his leg seemed less useless, he hauled himself back up onto the

mattress and then stood. The room swam; he persevered. He looked again at the three doors.

Door number one: a closet. Johnny moved to close it but then paused and swung it wide instead, staring narrowly at the contents: a couple dozen brightly-patterned shirts. Chozen?

Door number two: a hallway of hardwood leading to freedom. Good. An escape.

Door number three: a bathroom. Thank god, Johnny needed to piss very badly.

After he'd taken a shower – mouth hanging open under the stream to let it pool in his mouth before gulping it down, hands performing a quick fact-finding mission to confirm nothing too serious had happened the night before – he opened the second door again and let himself out into the rest of the condo.

It was very quiet, but there was something in the background, a distant hint of presence. Johnny crept down the hallway – more doors – and emerged into a spacious living area full of light. A sumptuous sofa and matching armchair sat facing a large plain screen filling one wall; he spotted a projector on a side table. Another wall consisted of floor-to-ceiling windows, and the Pacific stretched out into the distance below. The sound in his ears resolved itself into the roar of the tide.

Johnny stepped up to the glass and stared down at the water. The reflection of the sun was almost blinding.

“You are up,” said Chozen behind him. “Good.”

Johnny twisted around. “Hey – uh.”

He turned away, beckoning with two fingers over his shoulder. “Come. There is food.”

Johnny glanced back the view once more before following him, looking curiously at a large framed poster for *Final Hand* that graced the passage. It was a little weird, because the main guy on the poster was Roy; there was no way to know just by looking that the silhouette performing the incredible kick on top of the Statue of Liberty in the

background was Chozen. But he supposed Chozen knew and that was enough.

His kitchen was easily twice the size of Daniel's and full of gleaming surfaces: polished marble counters and stainless steel appliances that didn't look like they'd ever been used, or maybe they were just super clean, Johnny didn't know anything about appliances.

His meal looked almost comically modest in the massive kitchen: a plate holding slices of melon, a small bowl of what looked like porridge, and—

“Soup? For breakfast?”

Chozen plucked up a piece of melon. “One, yes soup for breakfast but also, it is past noon.” He waved Johnny into a chair and helpfully shoved the porridge at him.

Johnny sat down. “Thanks, this looks,” really, really boring, “good.”

“I am in training, diet very strict.”

“*This* is your training diet?” He looked again at the soup, which had some kind of debris floating in it; it bloomed when the bowl was moved.

Chozen ate another piece of melon and stared at him, expressionless.

Johnny shrugged and dug into the porridge. It tasted really, really boring.

“So, um,” he began after a while. He fiddled with his spoon and tried to find the best words to use. “Last night, uh.”

“Your memory has not returned?” Chozen made a considering noise. “You were already beginning to forget when I poured you into bed. I suppose it is gone for good then.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “What happened?” Was it bad? How bad was it.

Chozen waved a hand. “You danced with Daniel-san.”

Johnny stirred the porridge slowly. “And?”

“And? And nothing. You danced, you – made out at the table, very messy,” he added with a slight shake of the head; Johnny stared at

him, dead-eyed. “Then, Daniel-san passes out, the girls take him home. You drink some more and say a lot of things—”

“Things,” he repeated, heart and body performing a slow synchronized dive. “What things?”

“Mostly nonsense,” Chozen assured him. “I did not listen very closely. You said you and Daniel saw and understood absolutely everything, like dawn had come early. You said, looking meant living and living meant wondering. You said, everything happened and nothing happened, and it was all so much. But fifteen minutes later you did not remember saying any of this and were crying into my chest about not wanting to go home.”

“No, I didn't,” said Johnny, rigid.

Chozen nodded. “I, being a gentleman, naturally decided to take you in. You fell asleep in the taxi. I had to carry you into the bedroom.”

Johnny gazed down at the porridge, sightless. He didn't know which was worse: the idea of being carried by a grown man or not being awake to experience it.

“You are much too light for your frame – eat,” advised Chozen. “And I will get you your own bowl of soup.”

After breakfast, Chozen made no mention of returning Johnny home and Johnny couldn't bring himself to face the prospect yet. It seemed easier to collapse into the embrace of the man's couch and watch four hours of movies instead.

“This is from the director of the Okinawa film,” said Chozen, fiddling with the settings on the projector. “Chin says I should watch.”

“So, you're doing it? You're going back?” asked Johnny.

Chozen stared at the screen on the wall and grimly adjusted the lens until the picture came into sharp focus. He did not reply.

The movie was surprisingly long for a kung fu movie, and had a whole subplot about the hero's sister and the politics of the village families that Johnny didn't quite get. The fighting was top-notch, but Johnny's attention began to wander in the second half. He didn't want to fall

asleep again, so he cast about the room for something of interest.

The coffee table in the center of the room had a few magazines, which he flipped through for a while, one eye still on the screen. It also held a wide, shallow bowl full of closed envelopes.

“What're these?” he asked, tugging the bowl closer to the edge of the table. He lifted an envelope and studied the postage curiously.

“Letters from my uncle.”

“From – what, really?” Johnny looked at the stack; there was almost a dozen letters. He twisted around to stare at him. “He's been trying to contact you? For how long?”

Chozen shrugged stiffly. “A couple years. Yukie-san is busybody, always pushing me to reply.”

“Well – why haven't you?” This whole time, Johnny had assumed *exile* meant the other man wasn't wanted. Now he was confused.

On the screen, the hero found his sister in the burning wreckage of their family home, and his dialogue sped up, words stretching strident with frantic emotion.

It took a long moment for Chozen to reply. “My uncle said, he was dead to me. Afterwards, he proved this false by visiting the hospital. I could not speak for myself because of my injury, but it did not matter because he was not listening. He said he had never known such shame. He said because of me, he would stop teaching karate forever.”

He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes at the screen, but Johnny couldn't look away from his face to see what he was reacting to.

“Daniel-san was in the hallway outside the room," added Chozen. "He heard my uncle. He understands.”

“Okay,” said Johnny, nonplussed. “But – what's in the letters? It doesn't look like you've even opened them. But you were so worried about whether or not he'd visit if you went there.”

Chozen said nothing. For some reason, Johnny couldn't let it go.

“I know it's not the same thing,” he said, halting. He shifted to face him fully. “But if my mom – if she tried to contact me, it wouldn't matter. All those years of silence, and what she said the last time I saw

her – none of that would matter. I'd take what I could get."

"Maybe you shouldn't," said Chozen, expression losing some of its remove.

"Because, what? My pride?" Johnny shook his head, too hungover and wrung out to even feel embarrassed. "I'd rather have her."

Chozen's lip pinched. "Well – I am going to Okinawa, yes? I suppose I shall see which of us is right."

Johnny nodded wearily and dropped the envelope back in the dish. He beat a retreat to the couch and tried to focus again on the film. The villagers seemed unhappy. Again.

"So this corrupt aji guy," said Johnny, reclining back once more and groping for a cushion for his head. "They gonna take him down, right?"

Chozen sounded dubious. "Perhaps. But Chin says this director likes depressing endings."

Johnny made a face at the screen; a film over two hours long with no happy ending? Johnny didn't know anything about directing, but what the hell would be the point in that.

Chapter End Notes

> *"All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered."*
>
> -Kenneth Grahame, The Piper at the Gates of Dawn in The Wind in the Willows

Chapter 95: The Lantern Bearer

A few days after the-night-Daniel-isn't-thinking-about, he's in the shop nursery trying to get advice about what type of tree he should plant in his backyard and the soil preparation he'll need to do. What happens instead is, he gets life advice he doesn't need and didn't ask for.

“What do you mean, you're never going to have children?” asks Lucille, who had walked into the nursery just as Daniel got done explaining to Mr Miyagi that he *likes* monkey puzzle trees and no, he doesn't care about having a tree a kid can climb because, well—

He drags his thumbnail across his eyebrow, groaning a little. “Ma.”

“This is news to me,” she says, dusting her hands off on her apron so she can plant them on her hips. “You mean to tell me I will never be a grandmother?”

Daniel exchanges an agonized look with Mr Miyagi; or, more accurately, he looks at him in agony and Mr Miyagi looks back at him like, *you brought this on yourself.*

“Well – yes, but look. I mean. Louie is probably going to procreate at some point, and you know he doesn't have anybody else, so you'll basically—”

Lucille's expression grows, if anything, more stricken. “*Louie!*”

He spreads his hands and tries to reason with her. “I don't know what to tell you, Ma. I just don't – it's not for me, okay. I mean, plenty of people don't have kids,” and here he so narrowly averts the complete catastrophe that would be saying Mr Miyagi didn't have any, it leaves him shaken and a little sick.

Conversations can be such unpredictable minefields; with his mouth, it's a miracle he can talk to literally anyone without kicking off a domino-effect resulting in serious geopolitical implications.

He should really keep his mouth shut more often, or at least control who he opens it to – maybe he could start talking to the plants he's going to put in his yard. He hears that's supposed to help them grow better. Except, who's he kidding? He starts talking to his plants and they'll hurry up and evolve legs so they can leave too.

“Daniel-san would make good father,” says Mr Miyagi, just to make Daniel feel worse, it seems.

There's nothing he can really say here that won't upset the both of them. Daniel didn't exactly wake up this morning looking to convince his oldest friend and his mother that he is unfit for fatherhood because he once lost his temper and nearly killed a boy, and nobody capable of such things should be in charge of children. He'd like to avoid that little conversation, if possible.

Lucille starts, “If this is because the thing with that boy, Johnny—”

He says quickly, “No, no. That's nothing to do with it – and that's all over, I told you—”

“You don't look like you've been sleeping very well.”

Oh god, not this.

Daniel claps sharply to cut the moment off and puts his hands up. “Okay, you know what? I think I'll take a raincheck on this. I still have to go home and get ready for Ali's bridal shower, so really, we can – we can just pick this up never, okay?” And he turns to go.

“Daniel!”

“Daniel-san,” says Mr Miyagi.

He sighs and pauses in the doorway, bracing a hand against the frame. He bites his lip and looks back; Mr Miyagi gazes at him, eyes serious and searching.

In the end, he just says quietly, “Your idea for tree good for front yard, but not back. Backyard private space, for family and friends. You want tree that will provide comfort, shade.”

He chews on that and looks down at his feet. “How about – I can come over for dinner on Saturday, maybe, and we can talk options? I'll bring a dish.”

Mr Miyagi nods decisively. “Yukie will be happy to have you. Saturday, then.”

“Okay, it's a deal.” Daniel slaps the doorframe. “And I'll call you later, Ma.”

“You'd better,” she shouts at his back.

At home, Susan seems to have emptied the entire contents of her wardrobe onto her bed and is multitasking having some sort of pointless meltdown over the clothes while also fretting about the catering for the shower.

“You *know* her mom,” she says darkly, whipping a pink blouse through the air. “If it's not perfect – if they miss a single detail – it'll be all my fault.”

He leans in the doorway and munches through an apple. “Well, you said you'd take care of the catering, so technically it *would* be your fault,” he points out.

She glares at him, hands continuing on autopilot through a pile of shirts; what is she even looking for? Does she remember or was she just overcome by the need to plunge her hands into some overpriced threads. She's always saying his house is probably chipping away at her standards, after all.

He doesn't think Susan is actually worried about the catering. She didn't survive as Paul's assistant for as long as she did only to lose her cool over a bridal shower. Even Mrs Mills shouldn't be too much trouble against that particular outsized scale. So, no, this is something else.

He takes another big bite of his apple and asks, “How are you feeling these days, about the whole... Ali-getting-married thing.”

“Fine,” says Susan, terse.

He should tell her. He should really just tell her and get it over with; enough time has passed it's clearly not become a problem on Ali's end, so it's happy endings all around. Susan can't be *too* angry with him after everything's turned out fine. One might even say she doesn't need to know, but he ignores this voice pretty readily. She should know; she deserves to know. He's going to tell her.

Question is, does she deserve to know right now, before the bridal shower.

She and Ali seemed to have a lot of fun at the club that-night-Daniel-isn't-thinking-about. From what he remembers of the first part of the

evening, anyway. They danced and sat joined at the hip in the booth, just like old times. Happy endings all around! Well, for everyone but him.

“Why do you think you told her?” he asks abruptly. “After all these years, I mean. Why now?”

Susan stops digging through the pile of shirts and looks up at him. She doesn't ask him to specify because, really, what else could he be talking about.

She flicked the top of the shirt pile and moved around the bed to sit on the edge of the mattress. “After Marty, I – I don't know. Thought I couldn't possibly feel any worse. And I guess I started thinking, what if this is really it? This is what I get.” She shrugs. “One crummy, dysfunctional relationship after another, until I'm so old nobody wants me anymore and then I'm stuck ruining my dentures on your homemade pasta.”

Daniel smiles a little and sits down beside her. They both look at the wallpaper, which he really needs to redo – in the whole house, but in this room especially. He wouldn't want to stay in here every day, looking at this wallpaper.

Susan's tone turns subdued. “When she told me about the wedding, I wanted to be happy for her. I mean, what kind of person isn't happy their best friend is getting married?”

“I think we both know there was a certain complicating factor at play there.” And now Ali knows too! No, don't say that.

“Yeah. And hopefully now I can get over that for good – but jesus,” she laughs a little helplessly, “the way Ali's acted since she found out would drive me crazy if she wasn't getting married.”

Something about Daniel's body language must become very obvious – the way he rubs the top of his thighs, maybe, or how his spine goes a little rigid. Whatever it is, Susan picks up on it.

Her eyes slide over to him and stick and narrow.

Daniel opens his mouth and closes it and opens it again. He licks his lips. “Uh, look.”

Susan faces drains of color so quickly, she looks like she might collapse and disintegrate before his very eyes.

"*Daniel*," she says, and the waver in her voice gives his name a whole extra syllable.

He'd rather be back at the tree shop telling his lonely mother he was never going to have kids, actually.

"I've been meaning to tell you, it's just – there hasn't really been, you know. A good time?" He clears his throat unnecessarily. "And it seemed like things with Ali were – fine, actually, so it just didn't seem," don't say important, don't say important, find a better word, a more *accurate* word, "ah, important—"

"Didn't seem," says Susan, "important."

He winces.

Her face twists and she grabs his hand up, but like, not in a nice way? So much for him making her homemade pasta when they're old and grey. He'll be lucky to still have a hand with the way she squeezes it now; he makes a sharp pained sound and yanks his arm away, and then his body – but she follows him out of the room.

"What the fuck did you tell her?" is the fury's scream. Her fists pound at his back and shoulders all the way down the hallway.

He breaks and sprints around the corner, getting the table between the two of them. Susan slaps her hands down and stares him down with wild eyes: this vengeful spirit out of a Greek tragedy.

"Look, I'm really, really, *really* sorry," he says, panting a little. "I didn't mean to do it, it just slipped out! And I know, it could've gone really bad and, and you'd be completely in your rights to never speak to me ever again." He pauses, thinking about this. He was in the wrong and he had no right and all that but. It's only, well. "But you know, this was weeks ago now, and it seems fine?"

"*Fine?* You could have ruined my whole fucking life."

His stomach twists. "That's – a bit of an exaggeration, okay—"

"Just because no one has ever reacted badly when *you* come out—"

"The whole world regularly reacts badly to me!" He spreads his arms, waving them at himself. "Like, me, my whole person. It's kind of a thing."

“That's because you're an annoying twerp,” she shouts.

“Susan, Susan – think about it. It *is* fine. Isn't it? I mean, Ali knows and apparently still wants to spend all this time with you. You guys are closer than ever. So, like, it kinda all worked out, right?”

A strange look comes over Susan's face then. She straightens up and says flatly, “The only reason I'm not killing you right now is because I know you're heartbroken or whatever.” She leaves the room, she informs him, “So I'll kill you later.”

He rubs his shoulder, which she'd managed to really nail good. He sighs and nods. “Understood.”

“Oh.” Mrs Mills' smiles loses several watts and she stands aside to let him in the door. “Hello, Daniel.”

Right. “Hey there, Mrs Mills. Been a while.”

“Ali mentioned you were actually coming to this.” She eyes the tree in his hands. “And what's this?”

“It's a bonsai tree,” he says brightly. “I've been looking after this little guy for a couple years now, thought it might be a nice gift for Ali.”

She moves around him to shut the door. “Well, isn't that lovely. Of course, with the move to Denver, it might be a little difficult, transporting a tree all that way....”

He hangs onto his smile. “We'll see. I can help with packing it away safely.”

She indicates he should go into the sitting room, and he slips out of her company gratefully. There is a large credenza off to the side already laden with piles of wrapped gifts, and he carefully clears a space for the bonsai. He refuses to feel stupid; he knows Ali.

Freed of his burden, he turns around and finds about two dozen women looking back at him. He recognizes a few and tries to smile and nod at the rest.

“Hi,” he says, lifting a hand. “Daniel.”

“Why are you here?” demands a blond, pigtailed girl of about ten,

sitting kicking her legs bored over the side of a nearby chair. “You're a *boy*.”

He thinks the accusation in her voice is a little uncalled-for. “A man, actually,” he tells her, and the girl inexplicably stick her tongue out at him. His brow pinches.

“Daniel,” calls Babs from across the room, in the corner with Vicki. Her hand flutters in the air like the battle flag of reinforcements. “Over here, I saved you a seat.”

Trying not to feel like he's running too obviously, Daniel turns away from the hostile child and joins his friends.

“Where's Ali?” he asks after it's been like fifteen minutes. “And Susan? She left like forty minutes before I did.”

“I don't know, preparations or something like that,” says Barbara vaguely, before sitting up and saying with insistence, “Now I want to hear about you and Johnny Lawrence!”

But Daniel doesn't want to talk about him and Johnny Lawrence? He pretends she hadn't mentioned it and cranes his neck to look around around the room; check the hallway. The sooner Ali appears and they start the shower, the sooner all these women will stop casting curious looks at him.

“Ali says you broke up?” continues Barbara.

“They didn't break up,” says Vicki. “They were all over each other at the club the other night.”

An Aunt-looking type sitting nearby catches this and gives him a very recognizable *oh my god, he's like that* look. Daniel smiles at nobody.

“Nothing's going on with me and Johnny,” he says quietly. “Can we just drop it?”

“But you seemed so happy when *I* saw you together,” says Babs.

“Have you talked to him?” says Vicki, skeptical.

“He hasn't called,” says Daniel tersely, and both women make long, sympathetic sounds, which is terrible.

Of all the ways he thought it might end between Johnny and him, he'd never considered the possibility they would be so – ordinary. A near-

hookup at a club and later, silence over the phones. Life continuing on: time passing and their relationship dying a perfectly normal, perfectly dreary, quiet death. At least when Daniel is usually dumped, there is more shouting? Shouting is a kind of passion. He doesn't know what this is. Silence? The absence of everything.

Actually, you know what, he is going to go find Susan and Ali. They could be having some kind of crisis right now, and it's probably his fault because of the revelation he dropped on Susan earlier, so really, it's his responsibility to go manage the fallout; he hopes they're not fighting too badly, that would be *so* awkward with this room full of women and judgmental girl-children waiting on them....

Gazes and whispers trail behind him as he escapes the room; Mrs Mills coming from the entrance hall frowns as he passes, but he doesn't stop to chat.

They're no where he can find downstairs, so he backtracks and climbs the staircase to the second floor. They're not in the upstairs bathroom, or the study, and he wouldn't normally barge into Ali's bedroom, but the door is cracked; so he knocks a knuckle on the wood and pokes his head in, going *hey, Ali?*

Inside, Susan has Ali up against her vanity, various makeup brushes scattered all over the surface and floor at their feet, and they are kissing deeply.

In his shock, he puts too much weight against the door knob and the door creaks loudly open. The two break apart and whip around to stare at him, eyes wide.

Daniel puts his hands up. “Sorry, sorry. I was just coming to – uh, you know what? Never mind.” He starts to leave but then pauses, because, well. He turns quickly back, wagging a finger. “Heh, actually – Ali. Me finding you like this, it's, it's actually kinda funny?" He puts a hand on the knob of the door and leans against it, casually settling in to reminisce. "I don't know if you remember, but—”

“Get out!” say both women and, right.

He nods shortly and closes the door again.

“Well, did you find them? What's the hold-up?” asks Barbara once he has returned downstairs.

Daniel takes his seat. “Ah – no, no I didn't.”

“No?” says Vicki. “Where'd they go, Vegas? Are they eloping?”

Daniel laughs too loudly at that and has to strangle and wrangle the sound back down in his chest. He looks around at the room full of women waiting to celebrate a beautiful bride-to-be. He just knows they're all going to blame him for this somehow.

Chapter 96: (trying to be a) simple man

Chapter Notes

> Just a note to mention I have reorganized these final chapters since the original posting, in case anyone is confused by any disconnect between comments & content of the actual chapter.

Chozen made him take a few of his director's other tapes for some reason – probably wanted to off-load them on someone after the shitty ending of the one they'd watched, maybe lie to his agent about it later.

Johnny took a taxi back to pick up his bike (parking tickets, lots) and went home and spent the next couple days restlessly kicking around his condo while watching the movies. They weren't all bad.

Daniel didn't call, or stop by. Maybe he didn't remember anything from that night either, or maybe he was just busy, or maybe he remembered everything and—

Johnny couldn't even summon the energy to lie to himself. Even if Daniel was angry with him, he'd probably prefer to be angry to his face rather than give him the cold shoulder. Daniel was pretty much incapable of the cold shoulder: he could never be sure the other person truly understood the depth of whatever they did wrong; better to detail it out in a five-paragraph essay rather than risk them missing something.

Which left Johnny where he knew he'd been from the start: he needed to be the one to make the next move. If he wanted to do that. If he could convince himself that was a good idea.

“What's the point of being in a relationship?” he asked Robert.

Robert sighed; Johnny could hear the faint creak of his desk chair in the background, the turn of a page. It was eight o'clock at night.

“Like, why bother?” he asked, insistent.

“Family is the building block of a society,” said Robert.

“What's the point of being in a relationship?” he asked Tom.

Tom swiveled his bar stool from side-to-side and stared in the middle distance, considering the question. It was four-thirty in the afternoon.

“So we don't die alone?” said Tom.

“What's the point of being in a relationship?” he asked Dutch, the next time he called the prison. It was during the prescribed telephone hours.

“Sex,” said Dutch immediately.

“What's the point of being in a relationship?” he asked Chozen.

Chozen paused and frowned at him; Johnny didn't drop his guard even as he waited for a reply. It was seven in the morning and he didn't want to spend the rest of the day smarting from a hit he could easily have avoided.

“Lucky Penny, I apologize if you have misread any signals,” he said slowly, gravely. “But my heart must run free and untethered, like those inferior classic American cars with the loud engines.”

“What?” said Johnny, startled and blushing. “No, I mean – that's not – you mean Mustangs? Look, of course I *would* but that's not—”

“I am fucking with you,” said Chozen.

“What's the point of being in a relationship?” he asked Ali.

“Who is this? What are you saying, relationship? Relationship with *whom*?”

And it turned out that it wasn't Ali who'd answered, she just sounded a

lot more like her mother these days than he'd realized.

Johnny froze, thinking: does Ali even still live there? Why would she? Girl was twenty-eight years old.

There was a muffled sound on the other end of the line.

“Is this some kind of pervert?” demanded Mr Mills. “Listen, it's almost nine o'clock, mister.”

What's the point of being in a relationship, he asked the space where his mother was not. It was sometime in the middle of the night and he couldn't sleep, and she did not answer.

“What's the point of being in a relationship?” asks Johnny.

Daniel's face wrinkles in confusion. “What?”

He looks around the front yard as if he suspects Candid Camera and folds his arms, like he needs to protect his modesty even though he was the one to choose to come out onto the front step wearing a new bathrobe that shows off his calves.

“What kind of question is that?" he demands. "Did you seriously drive over here after weeks of being a complete no-show to ask me that?”

“Yes,” says Johnny, and then: “Well – no. Not just that. I needed to tell you I'm leaving the country. But that's not the important thing.”

“*What*?” says Daniel.

“What?”

(What happened was, Johnny was at home, doing his thing, and someone rang the doorbell. And the thing is, no one ever rang his doorbell? Some people knocked and many just tried to walk in, but for some reason few to none ever reached up to the weirdly-designed, almost-hidden position of the bell and pressed the button. This had him off his guard already; he'd forgotten he had a bell. So it felt like an alien call of very special purpose, or something like that.

When he opened the door, Chozen and his agent were standing on the other side. He invited them in; Chin declined. Johnny grew confused and Chozen avoided his eyes.

Chin was dressed in a sharkskin skirt suit with a sharply exaggerated silhouette, and it didn't matter that she was barely five feet tall – she had a manner that suggested the rest of the world was simply awkwardly big. He'd seen this effect from a distance, but it was something else up close.

“Hi?” said Johnny.

Chin didn't respond except to stare up into his eyes. He stared back. Seconds passed. His eyes wanted to check on Chozen but somehow she wouldn't let them? Eventually, his brow wrinkled. Hers did not. His eyes narrowed. Hers did not. His mouth twisted and he shifted on his feet. She still did not move.

“What's happening?” he finally asked.

“Can you follow direction?” said Chin, and well—)

Anyway, he had a job now.

“Look, that's not important,” says Johnny, annoyed.

“It's not?” says Daniel faintly. He has gone a little pale. “No, of course it's not. Why would it be.” He gestures briefly before shoving his arm back into his other. “Sure.”

Johnny shifts on his feet. “Do you have an answer to the question?”

Daniel looks up from the lawn, which he'd started to stare at with a peculiar grim expression. “An answer? To – what, the point of being in a relationship?” And when Johnny can't think of anything to do but nod and shrug, his whole appearance seems to bloom over with some undefinable emotion, or maybe it is just furious incredulity.

“*No*, Johnny, I don't have an answer – because that's a fucked-up question! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I mean – lots,” says Johnny, as if his body didn't want to actively shiver at the anger and disapproval in his voice.

Daniel pulls his bathrobe tighter around himself and almost paces right off the step of his house; half his foot bends over the concrete

step before shifting backwards. “I don't even agree with the underlying logic of the question. *What's the point.* As if, as if it's a *choice?* And like – sure, it is, I guess. But unless you're part of some inbred royal family in Europe, no one thinks about it like that. You and me, we can choose whether to date, but there's no arguing whether we already have a relationship. We have a relationship, Johnny,” he informs him, with an obnoxiously pitying tone. “Our relationship just happens to *suck*.”

“Okay.” He bites his lip and nods down at the ground like that doesn't feel like anything at all. “So why do you even want to bother with me then?” he asks. “What's different from before – from last time?”

“You mean besides the fact we're not seventeen?” checks Daniel, but Johnny refuses to let it go – he gives him a look and waits. Eventually, Daniel seems to understand. He sighs and nods up at the sky. “Look, Johnny—”

“You know I'm not a good person,” he says, relentless.

“Christ, Johnny, I don't know *what* you are,” says Daniel, fed up. He looks at him, amazed. “All I know is, you don't seem to want to let me find out.” He watches him shuffle in place for a moment and adds, “You know, maybe I have my own reasons for wanting to think a person can come back from doing something unforgivable. If that's what he wants.”

Is that what Johnny wants?

“What do you *want,* Johnny?” asks Daniel.

And then somehow it becomes simple, the way things often became simple whenever it was Daniel expressing them – he was less a conductor than a conduit and what he gave Johnny wasn't translation so much as transference. A vital energy to keep going.

Johnny looks up from the weed-sprouted cracks of the walk-up. “I want to help you build the deck in your back yard.”

Daniel looks at him, wordless.

“And – and maybe other stuff, too,” he adds. “I mean, if you want. If you let me.”

After a moment, Daniel waves a hand and rubs his forehead, lost. “What do you – I mean. Wait. Didn't you say you were leaving the

country?”

“Well, yeah,” says Johnny. “But that's just for a job.”

Chapter 97: Baba O'Riley

Chapter Text

When he said the thing about the deck, he didn't mean like, *right now*. But somehow they end up in the backyard anyway, awkwardly loitering over the patchy grass. Daniel has put on clothes, which Johnny finds a little disappointing but whatever; he guesses the man still has more to say or something.

“See you uh, replaced the boards,” he says, nodding to where his patch job on the fence has been updated to a more permanent fix. “Are you going to paint those to match, or—”

“*Yes*,” says Daniel, harried. He waves a hand and rubs his forehead. “I'll get around to it. Eventually.”

He hadn't meant it like an expectation or demand, but all Johnny can do now is simply nod. “Cool.”

He swings his arms and looks around. He kind of thought there'd be more kissing when he came over here. Maybe he should take the initiative? Now that he's a working man again and all; it's the kind of thing working men did.

“So,” says Daniel, prompting. “You got a job overseas?”

Johnny looks back to find the man has actually crossed his arms, almost defensively. “Oh,” he says, distracted; what's his *deal*? Maybe Chozen was wrong about what happened at the bar the other night. “I mean, not really?”

“Not really?” repeats Daniel, jaw cocked.

He shrugs. “I'm just going with Chozen for his movie?”

Daniel's eyebrows go up, and it doesn't stop there – his whole head goes back and on and on. He turns in place, silently almost – laughing? Marveling at nothing Johnny can see or understand. He doesn't feel *he* is being laughed at, so he stands by and waits.

Worst thing Daniel-san ever did was the thing that saved me, Chozen had said. *Led to all this. Maybe can work for you too.*

“I'm gonna be his personal assistant,” he adds, when Daniel doesn't

say anything. “They said I could learn the ropes and maybe, eventually – I don't know. We'll see.”

He doesn't want to get ahead of himself. Hanging around training with Chozen and watching him kick ass seems like a great job just by itself. He doesn't really want to want anything more than that. Not for the moment.

Daniel still says nothing. He is looking across the yard, into the distance, brow pinched in thought.

“I'm coming back,” says Johnny. Daniel's eyes return to him. “And I'd – I'd like to come back to you.”

Daniel blinks and seems to arrive at a decision. He clears his throat and claps his hands, flicks some fingers at him, beckoning. “Okay, here's what we're gonna do, Johnny.”

He comes to attention, hopeful. “Yeah?”

“We're gonna fight,” says Daniel.

“What?” His face falls. “No?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Can't I just,” he makes a frustrated sound, and some honest disgust is mixed in there too, “why can't I just suck your cock or something?” Johnny finds this improves most situations.

Daniel gives him a look. “I think it'll be good to clear the air,” he says decisively, waving an arm at nothing.

His mind is made up, Johnny realizes with a sinking heart. And then he can't even focus on reacting to that disappointment, because Daniel starts bouncing on the balls of his feet. He shrugs his narrow shoulders a bunch, as if he actually needs to limber up those Gumby arms. He paces a few feet, ducking and weaving like someone miming a boxer (badly).

“C'mon, Johnny, you always wanted to fight me, haven't you?” he says. “Don't you want to see who's best?”

“Not really,” says Johnny, staying where he is. Above it all. “I don't want to hurt you.”

“Hey, big shot, who says you even can?” says Daniel mildly.

Johnny says nothing. He does not smile.

Daniel stops jumping around and asks seriously, “Hey, do you trust me?”

Weird question. Awful question. “Are you asking me to?”

Daniel just smiles. “Look, that uh, that tournament back in school – it was no contact, right? We'll do that. No one is getting hurt on this fine afternoon. Just a friendly little sparring match, okay?”

Johnny starts to nod, but honesty makes him grimace a little. “I was definitely going to try to kick your ass in that tournament. I mean, that was everybody's plan.”

Daniel cocks his head, watching him curiously. “Do you think you would've gone through with it? I mean, after everything that happened.”

He doesn't want to talk about this. He clears his throat and scratches the back of his neck. “With everybody watching? I mean – yeah, probably.”

(But if he hadn't succeeded, if Daniel had beat him instead—

It existed so vividly formed in the secret space behind his eyes at night whenever he dreamed back then. Sometimes he'd wake up forgetting it wasn't real. He'd look around his bedroom in Sid's house, reassured by the posters on his wall, the stacks of tapes overflowing next to his boombox, the piles of laundry: all these mundane signs of a delicate balancing act still ongoing.

And every morning he made himself forget again, that possible future: his sensei renouncing him and his friends and family following, the complete relinquishing of any John Lawrence he wanted to be. But in exchange for losing absolutely everything – Daniel.

Daniel, who'd fought for the right to do whatever he wanted to Johnny, and what he wanted was Johnny on his knees: in the locker room, in the bath room, in the middle of the cafeteria. Something meant to be squashed and hidden brought out into the full light of day; everyone would know and no one would stop it, because Daniel had won fair and square; everyone would see and no one could judge, because Johnny had fought so hard. They would understand that, at least.)

“Okay, so your imagination is a little lacking,” says Daniel blithely. He walks forward until he's only a few feet away and stops, holding Johnny gaze. “Think about it. We're in the ring—”

“Mat,” corrects Johnny. He gestures, illustrating. “It's a mat, just a – there's a bunch all around the room, and then one in the center they use for the final match. Not that you'd have gotten anywhere near that,” he adds; he doesn't really mean it – he has no idea – but it feels good to make the joke, at least.

Daniel's lips crease in a small, humoring smile. “Sure. But if I did. Everybody's watching, right? All your friends, the people in the stands or whatever, munching on their popcorn and sucking down Pepsi. But hey, Johnny, when you step on that mat – it's just me and you.”

Johnny finds himself moving to stand with his feet together, hands at his sides. Daniel gives him a slight nod, pleased. Eyes intent.

“Okay, uh – now what?” asks Daniel, after a somewhat extended pause.

Johnny shakes his head a little, biting back what might be a grin. “Now, we bow.”

They both bend at the hips, as is proper. By the time they've reset, something has changed between them.

There are no more smiles. They lock eyes, but even so focused, Johnny feels aware of every part of the other man: the slender curve of the muscles in his upper arm as he settles into the ready position; the strong blades his hands become as he sets them up in the air between them; the palpable bristling energy in his legs as he waits, anticipating. His eyes – always, his eyes and attention.

Daniel was right, of course: they could be standing in front of a thousand people, and it wouldn't matter.

Daniel steps to the left and Johnny follows suit like it's a game of cards. Some day he might find himself without the right one to lay, and he'll have to choose something else. But for now—

“What are you waiting for?” asks Daniel, low. His mouth curls, letting Johnny in on the joke. “You know I'm not gonna strike first?”

Johnny rolls his eyes and throws a punch, slow and telegraphed – Daniel slaps it aside with unrestrained speed.

Johnny is startled into reacting for real, twisting to keep him in his eye line. They watch each other, alert. He swings and is blocked; he bends back to avoid a follow-up high kick (so *beautiful*).

The next time Daniel's iron bar of an arm slides along his, knocking his aim off course, Johnny steps into it, curling his arm around the man's back – Daniel's eyes widen, surprised but somehow unwary – and he pulls him into a deep kiss.

Johnny shuts his eyes against the whole world and falls back, dragging them both to the ground. His back hits the grass but Daniel's hand catches his head before it can make bouncing contact.

And here on this spot they will plant something – proper grass, or perhaps flowers (but not dumb ones), maybe even a tree. Here in this yard they will build a deck, a space to hold people they love beneath the traveling sun. Here at this house they will argue a lot, because Daniel has too many books and Johnny has terrible fucking taste in decor—

—and it travels outward, ever expanding, like maybe even someday the whole Pacific Ocean will have to deal with the fact that Johnny loves Daniel LaRusso, and despite the world saying anything to the contrary, actually, *this* is why the waves crash the way they do against the shore, and this is why the sun bothers to look across the water when its setting: a straight-line beam of light because it wants to give them as much time as it can, gilding every moment until its inevitably gone and the jealous night takes over; but it's okay, because they find in the darkness they are the same as they are in the light.

Daniel breaks away to sit up over him and strip off his tank, revealing a torso flushed and dusky. He looks down at Johnny with ruffled dark hair and a wide smile which turns quizzical as he studies him.

“You okay? You look kind of weird right now.”

Johnny swallows lightly and breathes in deep, looking up at him smiling against the brilliant blue of an afternoon sky he has no idea about. He feels the ground beneath them, and the warm press of Daniel's cock against his hip.

“I'm good,” he decides.

Chapter 98: Bron-Yr-Aun

The whole idea of a Midsummer Cleaning to Give Our Lives a Fresh Start had been Daniel's idea but in typical Daniel LaRusso fashion, he'd apparently meant it as a corrective for *other* people.

“I don't believe in burning the past. You never know when something might want to come back,” he says, and he angles a smile at Johnny against the light dimming in the west over the Pacific, all shining eyes and bright toothiness. It should be too smarmy to land, grease skidding on the tracks, and yet—

“Urgh,” says Susan from across the fire. “Couldn't you have just picked out a book you didn't like or something? You seemed plenty annoyed with the one from last week.”

Daniel looks sharply over. “I'm not going to *burn* a *book* – and anyway, that was from the library.”

It is getting on to almost eight, and the high tide has receded enough for the ocean to feel less like it is about to hurl itself across the stretch of beach and vindictively douse their small fire.

Susan has exchanged her gigantic umbrella for a gigantic sweater and reclined so her head is on Chozen's thigh and her feet close enough to kick sand at Daniel if she so chooses (and she has chosen at least twice).

Daniel's bare legs and arms are dusted with it, pale grit standing out against his sun-darkened skin. He has not put on a sweater, because it's July and also because maybe he knows he can just use Johnny if the ocean breeze becomes chilly.

Chozen makes a dismissive sound. “If you are not going to burn anything, then I shall start. I have the most to get through, anyway,” he adds, hefting one of the letters from his uncle.

Johnny could perhaps dispute this statement, but he hasn't yet gone through his own box; he doesn't really know how much he'll end up throwing on the fire.

Chozen tosses the first envelope atop the pile of pale driftwood, and they all watch the edges catch and darken, start to curl and obliterate the postmark, the carefully penned address in English, and any

evidence that a man six thousand miles away once sat down and tried to reach his nephew.

“I can't believe you're really burning those without reading them,” says Daniel. “What if Sato said something important? What if he confessed to murder or corporate wrong-doing, or like, loving you very, very much?”

On the tail end of this thought, Daniel stares into the fire with a look of such dismay and growing discomfort, he almost seems poised to reach in and try to save the letter. Frowning in distraction, Johnny shifts a couple inches to the right in case he needs to hold him back – just doing his due diligence. He's pretty sure a good boyfriend doesn't let his man burn himself in really stupid, avoidable ways.

“If you learned to read, you could have satisfied your insufferable nosiness,” says Chozen. Daniel makes a face and says something to him in Japanese. Chozen merely puts his head back and says snidely, “Illiteracy is *so* sad.”

Susan clears her throat and reaches for the large master rolodex from her old job. She hauls it onto her stomach. She slides a card out at random and reads aloud:

“'Keith Gordon. New York. Done with acting but get real. Looking for more directing opportunities.'”

“Anything we recognize?” asks Daniel.

Susan flips the card and peers at the back, which is covered with dense writing. “Uh, in the 80s he was in a couple movies? *Christine* and *The Legend of Billie Jean*, *Back to School*... just television appearances since then, looks like. He also directed *Midnight Clear* and *The Chocolate War*—”

Daniel suddenly leans forward on his shins; Johnny conscientiously eyes the shrinking space between him and the fire.

“You're telling me Paul represents the guy responsible for that abomination?” he demands hotly. He looks around the fire at their nonplussed expressions. “They changed the ending. It was a complete betrayal of the narrative, the author's themes. They made it... *happy*.”

“Sounds awful,” says Johnny, supportively lying. Daniel sinks slowly back down to the sand and squints at him, suspicious; Johnny smiles blankly back, giving away nothing.

Susan shrugs and flicks the card into the fire. “So long, Keith Gordon.”

Johnny returns his attention to his own box of burnables and folds back the dusty cardboard flaps. “How do I know what I should keep or throw away?” he asks them, sifting through the jumble.

“Trust your feelings,” advises Daniel, but then he blanches and darts a hand out to snatch the piece of paper from Johnny's hand. “Unless it's your birth certificate, jeez. Johnny, what other important documents you keeping in there?”

“I don't know,” says Johnny; does his high school transcript count? When he left Sid's house, he hadn't been sure if it would matter, if people would care what grade he got in Geometry or English class. He's pretty sure the film crew in Okinawa won't ask about any of that, though.

He decisively tosses the transcript into the fire and continues rifling through the box.

Chozen was right; Daniel is really nosy. As the minutes drift by, he scoots closer and closer until he's pressed up against Johnny's side. His skin is hot from sitting so close to the fire, but Johnny doesn't mind.

“Do you think I should burn my trophies?” asks Johnny. He tries to check with his feelings but they don't seem to have much to say on the subject.

“No,” says Daniel, surprisingly adamant. Johnny looks at him and he shrugs a little and says, “...They're plastic, it'd be bad for the environment.”

“Keep the trophies, you might feel different in twenty years,” advises Chozen.

“Hey, this looks like my handwriting,” says Daniel.

Johnny jerks with too-late panic to grab for the note, but Daniel rolls backwards in a neat somersault. He lands on his belly in a soft cloud of sand, note still held up in front of him. He puts his chin in his hand and lets his knees bend, feet rising to kick idly at the air. He reads it.

“Gosh,” he muses, appreciative, “I was a pretty funny kid.”

“Funny looking, maybe,” drawls Susan, flicking another business card into the fire.

Johnny shakes his head and ignores the flush of embarrassment overtaking his face. He returns to the box and lifts out the photo of his mom and him.

“Suze, you know, they have a word for people like you,” says Daniel, folding the note and tucking it into the back pocket of his jeans shorts.

“Flawless?”

“*Homewrecker*,” he says, enunciation heavy like a missile across the fire.

“Oh, please. They didn't even live together.” Susan shifts against Chozen, belying her own discomfort. “I mean, technically.”

In the photo, he's maybe ten. It's impossible to read anything from his expression beyond that he didn't really want to have his picture taken; he wonders if Sid had wielded the camera that day. He always barked impatient directives when taking photos: hold still; smile; no, not like that.

“And I thought we weren't talking about that,” Susan continues, loud and plaintive. “Can you try to be a little more sensitive, please? She hasn't like, made up her mind or anything. I'm basically dying over here.”

“Yeah, you're really the one suffering the most in this particular soap opera plot,” says Daniel, who apparently recently had decided to become a Greg Partisan.

Laura stands behind him in the photo, arms coming down over his skinny shoulders and chin resting on the top of his pale head. She looks perfect. She always took great pictures. Sid could bitch and moan for the whole world to hear and be embarrassed secondhand by, but her smile always remained impenetrably the same. She could be thinking anything in the photo; no one would or will ever know.

Johnny wonders if his mom is happy with the life she built. She got pregnant with him right out of school; maybe she'd been waiting all those years of his life for a reason, just one good reason to be free of him. Perhaps when Kreese told her the truth about Johnny, the first thing she felt was relief: confirmation he'd always been the biggest mistake of her life.

Or maybe that's all bullshit. He has no way of knowing. He just knows it doesn't feel very good to think about.

Daniel gets up on his hands and knees and crawls back to Johnny's side. He looks down and absorbs the photo in his hand and folds a warm hand over Johnny's knee. If he thinks anything about whether Johnny should keep or throw this one, he doesn't share.

“Maybe I should flip a coin,” Johnny says to him, silently asking.

Daniel hooks his chin over his shoulder and says quietly, “Or maybe you should just tuck it away again. There's no rush. It's not going anywhere.” And maybe what he means is, she's not going anywhere. Burning the picture isn't going to change anything, not really. She'll still be over in Encino, every day choosing not to reach out to him. But who knows, maybe she'll change her mind when she's sixty.

Johnny drops it back into the box and reaches for the next item.

“Who is *that*?” asks Daniel, blinking down at the photo of Sam Lee, who is shirtless and gleaming and very, very hot.

“Just a guy I knew back on the circuit,” says Johnny.

He keeps this photo too; he thinks it might be good to remember someone who liked him, who he'd liked back, and be able to think occasionally about all the harmless what-ifs.

He puts an arm around Daniel and watches the fire consume all the things they won't need to think about the next morning or ever again.

Chapter 99: A Song Not Yet Heard

“I don't think it's *that* weird a thing to suggest,” argues Daniel as they gather their belongings several hours later. “I mean, she had Chozen, now she's got Johnny too. You're already used to working under punishing conditions for a psychopathic agent personality. It just seems like a neat fit. All my eggs in someone else's basket.” He pauses. “Am I a cuckoo bird?”

“You're definitely cuckoo,” says Johnny, who has no idea what he's talking about. He pauses in kicking sand over the fire to peer down at the unburned fragments scattered along the edge of the coals. Susan had decided to dump all the photos of her ex in one go, and some had flown free and escaped the worst of the flames. In one of them, she is arm in arm with a very butch woman – her ex, he's assuming.

“Leaving aside the fact that I don't speak any language other than English, which would be *uh*, kind of a big drawback for the assistant of someone who regularly works in Asia – maybe I don't want to work for another psychopathic agent personality?”

Johnny's brow furrows. There is something oddly familiar about the woman in the photo. He bends to look more closely at it.

“It is for the best,” says Chozen with a sigh as he stands and stretches. “Chin already has assistant.”

She has a stubbly red crewcut and a square jaw that makes her smile look too small for her face. Her gaze is uncomfortable, or at least, he feels uncomfortable looking at it. He thinks he recognizes something: perhaps the unhappiness hinted at in her expression?

“*See?* Don't be so quick to go signing me back up for the working life, okay? I am taking my time, exploring my options. Sleeping in every day,” she adds.

Johnny squints and the feeling of recognition only grows stronger. It's a queasy sensation, unsettled. His nerves are prickling over like he's suddenly in a fight. He's never seen this woman before in his whole life. Has he? Unless. *Wait*—

“Johnny, it's late,” says Daniel, voice piercing the cold horror coalescing around his consciousness. “C'mon.”

His hand brushes down his forearm before catching his hand, and he pulls a numb Johnny stumbling away. Chozen kicks sand over the remaining flames, dousing the scene and his brimming realization in darkness.

There is no moon that night, and the city feels surprisingly far away. Small dots of light are scattered along the beach in the distance on either side of them: other fires tended by other people. Strangers but for the similarity of purpose. (Sort of like two people trying to drink off their misery in a shitty bar in Reseda—)

Johnny takes a large, hurried step across the sand and accidentally kind of plows into Daniel. He ignores his slight *oof* and the way he bends forward when Johnny drapes himself over his back. He wraps his free arm around his spare waist to make the moment seem more intentional, like he is just chilled or something. The ocean breeze and all that.

He needs to not think what he was about to think, and never think of this not-thought thing ever again. It's easier to do this, with arms full of Daniel.

He gets a nose full of tickling hair as Daniel turns his head to the side and says wryly, “Hey, we walking here or what?”

Johnny squeezes him once before letting go, but keeps possession of his hand, just to keep the thoughts at bay. “Yeah, we're walking.”

And forward they all go – probably. It is hard to be completely sure in the dark.

“Don't let me slip off if I fall asleep,” says Daniel as he climbs onto the bike behind Johnny. His helmet knocks awkwardly into Johnny's as he immediately slumps forward, wrapping his arms around him and getting comfortable.

Daniel loudly protests to the contrary but he actually likes riding on the bike; it's fine. At some point he'll catch up and realize if he admits it, he gets to spoil them both a little. It'll be worth the wait. Daniel likes treating Johnny and anyway, he has never been big on self-denial.

Johnny flicks his visor up so he can see the night streets and then

drops his hand to hold the other man's wrists. He shakes them a little.

“Hey, stay awake,” he says, trying to make it an order. He thinks it probably comes out too quiet: his voice, automatically pitching itself not to disturb him.

Oka-ay, is the cracked-jaw yawn of a reply. But Daniel's thighs tighten around his own when he starts the engine. Johnny decides not to worry about it.

He eases the bike back from the curb and purrs forward. They pass Chozen and Susan walking back to Chozen's condo; the two wave, flickering hands on the periphery, and he guns the engine in acknowledgment before shooting away down the street. Daniel's arms squeeze him tight in response to the hard acceleration, which is mostly why he did it.

The night opens up and pulls them in, the headlight of the bike joining the thousands of others running across the land like a river. Johnny has always liked driving at night the best. Something about the hour and the light makes the traffic around him feel less like potential adversaries than during the day.

Night is also the only time the valley looks beautiful – and, of course, only still from a distance: its featureless skyline in the negative becoming a glittering plane beneath an enormous sky. The illusion dissipates as he descends into it, but the feeling of possibility lingers. But that's the night for you, or maybe just the company.

Daniel has largely dropped off by the time Johnny slides through his neighborhood in Van Nuys. Every house on his block has its lights off already: product of being surrounded by senior citizens.

Johnny parks in front of the garage and switches the bike off. The engine growls and putters into silence. He takes off his helmet, shaking out his hair, and sits for a moment, looking at the house.

He always forgets there's a window in the living room; the simple rectangle of glass seen from the outside always seems to disappear once inside. They could always pull the blinds and shove the curtain aside, but he thinks there's probably a reason Daniel hasn't before now. Chozen had said something about a bay window? That might be worth thinking about.

Behind him, Daniel gradually stirs. He lifts his head. “We home?” he asks, his voice a little raspy with sleep.

Johnny squeezes his leg. “Yeah.”

“God, it's late,” he says, clambering off the bike and stretching. He shoves the helmet up his forehead but doesn't take it off completely as he pauses and looks at Johnny quizzically. “What's up? Aren't you coming in?”

Johnny wants to hear the invitation. He shrugs one shoulder and flexes his hands over the handlebars, like he is undecided. “I don't know – your mattress kind of sucks.”

Daniel stands back on his heels and braces one hand on his hip, giving him a deeply skeptical look. He is still wearing the helmet like a hat, and he looks pretty stupid.

“You know,” he says slowly, “if you care that much about the goddamn bed, we could always *move the bed*. I'm not attached to my mattress, man. We can switch them out. Now with your bike, of course.”

“Not with your car either,” Johnny points out.

Daniel waves a hand. “So I'll borrow a truck from work.”

Johnny bites back a smirk and nods thoughtfully. “Yeah, we probably should eventually.”

“Oh, eventually. But no rush?”

Johnny can't take it anymore; he reaches and pulls the helmet off the other man's head. He flips it between his hands and says idly, “I think I'm going to hang onto the condo for a while – thought maybe it would be good to take it slow between us. You know, don't want to rush anything.”

Daniel nods seriously and looks around the dark street and neighboring houses with exaggerated care. He takes a step towards the house and says in mock whisper:

“So what are you still doing here, then? I can't be having *strange young men* visiting me in the night – what will the house mother say?” Johnny rolls his eyes and climbs off the bike. Daniel scampers quickly across the small yard, putting up a protesting hand. “Whoa, whoa. I

mean it, Johnny. Cohabitation before marriage is asking for a scandal. I am above all things a good girl, you see."

His eyes are still sparkling with amusement as Johnny steps in close. He has arranged himself securely against the front door and his head now goes back, a silent command that happens to look like an offer. When Johnny kisses him, his lips immediately curve into a smile, because he likes nothing more than getting his way.

As Daniel fumbles to unlock the door and lets them inside the dark house, a sensation descends of something not quite ending and not quite starting. The shadowed shapes of the furniture in the living room are both familiar and not, delineating a space of possibility which they move through with careless intent.

Daniel doesn't let Johnny out of arm's reach, pulling him in to kiss against the back of the couch; the wall between the living room and kitchen; the open doorway of the bathroom which he is about to fall through—

Johnny slaps an anchoring hand against the frame and reels Daniel back to safety. He steps backwards and doesn't let the space between them grow again. Safer this way.

"Strip for me, Johnny," he says in the bedroom.

Is there anything like the relief of being wanted and wanted in the right way?

He stands back beside the bed and removes his shoes and socks, his shirt. Daniel's eyes fall across his shoulders and chest in honest desire. He is not capable of seeing what a man should be, only whatever Johnny is, and his touch reflects this appreciation as he runs his hands down his arms.

He stills Johnny's hands on the button of his jeans, and Johnny looks up through his hair to meet his eyes.

"Did you mean it, about keeping the condo?" he asks.

Johnny hesitates but his tone had only been curious, so he says, "I don't know, maybe? I've," and his breathing hitches and Daniel reaches around, palming the small of his back: fingers playing with skin beneath his waistband. "I've never tried to not – be miserable there."

Daniel nods and his hand eases down, squeezing. “I guess I wouldn't mind trying out that kitchen,” he says.

“Can we talk about this later?” asks Johnny, half his mind gone to the finger trying to coax its way inside him despite the restraining denim and the hard cock he can feel against his hip. It seems much more desperate than its owner; Johnny has a lot of fellow feeling for it. He thinks he and Daniel's cock should plot a rebellion, overthrow the regime.

“We could have sex there too,” offers Daniel. “I bet that would help loads.”

“Loads,” agrees Johnny. Loads and loads. He could take so many—

He drags his shaking hands back into action with effort, tending to Daniel's shorts first. He pulls the button free, jerks the zipper down. Daniel sways against him, *and somehow he's still talking:*

“I could fuck you by the door. I could fuck you on the floor! We could fuck on your sofa and,” and here critically he pauses, eyes going narrow. Somehow Johnny just knows, the man is trying to think of something that rhymes with sofa. God help him.

“How about you fuck me here first?” he says, and he slides to his knees, stripping the man bare along the way.

He presses his mouth to the smooth skin at the crux of his thigh and hip before moving east; drags his nose through the wiry curls north of his groin, filling his sense with all he wants until nothing else matters, until nothing else exists. Just this, just Daniel.

A hand folds the hair back from his forehead and grips his skull firmly. He makes a desperate sound in the back of his throat, *please*.

When Daniel speaks above him again, he sounds more serious. “I don't mean to tease,” he says quietly. “It's only, sometimes I feel like I have to crack a joke or lose a handle on everything. You're just so—”

Johnny licks over his cock, slow and lingering. He opens his eyes and blinks up at him.

Daniel's lips part. He doesn't say anything more; he doesn't need to. His grip on Johnny's head tightens and his other hand takes hold of his jaw, guiding him over his cock properly, brooking no questions or second thoughts. No more teasing.

Johnny's eyes fall in relief as he takes it all to the root. Daniel's hand switches its grip, fingers questing lightly along his cheek, the pad of his thumb reverently sketching out the feel of himself filling Johnny's mouth to completion.

There we go, says Daniel, and his voice is richly satisfied, so very pleased with him. He runs his fingers back through Johnny's hair again and asks him if he can shove his jeans down, if he is able to multitask, and if Johnny's mouth wasn't full right now he'd offer him a whole resume's worth of objectives and skills. Instead he must show him, and urgently:

Johnny can gets his jeans down. Johnny can reach back and work himself until he's open at both ends, and then Daniel can have him however he wants him. He can do this without neglecting Daniel's cock for a moment, so he will be ready for whichever decision is made (he is also a team player).

Look at you. I love watching you touch yourself. Giving yourself pleasure, letting me give it to you. You've always had so much potential for feeling pleasure – Johnny, it's so beautiful.

Beautiful is nothing like Johnny has ever felt, but the word matches the feeling in his body as he reforms himself around Daniel. The now is here and nothing he wants to turn away from, though Daniel does eventually turn him – hands careful on his jaw at the withdrawal and insistent on his hip until he has arranged Johnny chest down over the edge of the bed.

Johnny blinks across the bedspread at the far wall and breathes deep, sweat-slicked ribcage expanding against the mattress. He relishes the ache at the back of his throat, the certainty of a voice made hoarse and rough. He wants to hear the proof, so he says, not quite steadily:

“That first morning I was here, I wanted you to fuck me so bad.”

The light laugh drifts across the room like a breeze. “Yeah, you weren't super subtle about that.”

His knees shift fretfully over the floor, muscles in his thighs tensing in anticipation as he hears Daniel open the drawer of his bedside table. “It was the first time I'd felt good in – a long time. I woke up in this bed and it smelled of you and – it's all I wanted, all I could think about.” He tries to keep still, to stop his body from betraying its eagerness so completely, but the first touch of Daniel's hand on his hip makes him shake. He buries his face in the bed and adds, voice

muffled by blankets and some sulkiness, “But instead you went to *work*.”

Daniel plants his knees outside Johnny's and drapes himself over his back so he can say into his ear, *Well, you didn't ask, did you?* His hand, slick with lube, palms Johnny's ass. *Or maybe you did and I just couldn't hear it.*

Johnny feels the spread of those fingers, the strength of the hand. He wishes he could see it touch him. But he'd rather feel it. And Daniel seems intent on taking his time, so he decides to ask for it.

He asks with the arch of his back and the jerk of his hips; with both hands fisting hard into the bedspread, dragging it loose from its neat corners. He asks with the tilt of his neck and all the breath in his body. He asks with his voice.

And Daniel gives him all he asks for and more.

Chapter 100: On the Nature of This Thing, Book Two

Mornings in his kitchen now come gilded with a soft warm glow courtesy of the new window over the sink. It lets in more than just golden light – it seems to welcome the world itself into the room. The brilliant morning sky, the dancing leaves of Mr. Sanches's broad oak: color and motion and occasionally someone cursing passionately at their grandkids in Spanish. It's all a good reminder that no man is an island.

“No toques eso, o lo romperás, ¡cabroncetes!”

Daniel puts the kettle on and leans against the sink, musing: but maybe a man can be part of an archipelago?

“Ah, no. No, Nicky. La jodiste.”

Or maybe a fleet a ships moving *around* the islands? Trade is the lifeblood of a society, after all, and the supply chain is crucial. Someone's gotta do it.

“¿Por qué arruinas todo?”

Except, is he then participating in the perpetuation of a system wherein others pretend *they* can be islands? Does that make him culpable?

“Mis tomatoes,” goes the final croon, lifting and falling like the song of a mourning dove.

No, Daniel thinks. He can't take responsibility for others' foolishness. That way lies madness. He should just stick to servicing his little archipelago. (He's really lucky it's only a metaphorical archipelago, too, because otherwise he might have to finally summon an opinion on the downstream implications of NAFTA and he's been putting that one off for months.)

Oh: the water's done.

Back in the bedroom, Johnny is awake but not yet up, which is great

because a lazy Johnny is one of Daniel's favorite Johnnys. So much better than an up-and-at-'em-gonna-run-five-miles Johnny, mostly because this one is here and available and the other is already out the door. Of course, when that one gets back, he is always flushed pink all over and very happy to share the sweat he's worked up with Daniel, so really, as with most things in life, there are upsides to every scenario here.

Johnny makes a slight sound as Daniel slides up against his back and reaches around to cup him lightly. Daniel presses his mouth to the top knob of his spine and murmurs *g'morning.*

In response Johnny cranes his neck around to offer his mouth for a kiss. Daniel rewards him thoroughly.

It takes some control to keep his grip on him light and teasing, to not roll him onto his stomach and find out if he's too sore from the previous night for another round – Johnny likes working out in the mornings, after all, goes the voice in Daniel's head. He'd probably be like, really, really happy about it.

“Should get up,” says Johnny, between slow kisses. Luckily he doesn't really mean it because a second later he rolls onto his back and hooks an arm around Daniel to pull him down. This breaks Daniel's grip on his dick but it's okay, Daniel's is there to keep it company.

He thrusts idly against Johnny and takes his mouth again.

A while later, Johnny turns his head and says, *no, really.*

“Right,” says Daniel, conscientious. He grinds down. “We need breakfast.”

His hands grab Daniel's ass, urging him along. “Well, not – you know, I don't actually have breakfast most mornings,” he points out, a little breathless. “It's just—”

“Mmhmm!” goes Daniel brightly, hurriedly putting a stop to such terrible talk by kissing him again. Breakfast is the best meal of the day, and the idea of people skipping it entirely hurts his soul a little.

They rock together and Daniel watches Johnny steadily flush a deeper hue of pink; he feels the heat rise up under his skin with his lips. His gasps and grunts percuss the air at Daniel's ear, needy and relieved in equal measure.

Having Johnny beneath him feels a little like letting the world into the room, too.

After breakfast (which Johnny eats every last crumb of, thus confirming for Daniel his private thesis that the other man is merely unpracticed at wanting stuff and doesn't know how to recognize that his body has clearly been yearning for breakfast every single day for who-knows-how-long, so sad—) they hang out in the living room for a while.

Johnny has bought a book on tape that is supposed to teach him basic Japanese phrases. He pulls his headphones over his ears and sets to stretching out in the middle of the room while making vaguely constipated-looking faces and mumbling constantly under his breath. It's really distracting.

Daniel frowns and slouches deeper into his armchair, hauling his book up to block the sight of the other man stretching his hamstrings while butchering a simple request for directions to the airport.

“I don't know if this is a good idea,” says Johnny at last, hauling his headphones off. He starfishes on the floor and gazes up at the ceiling, frowning.

“I agree, immersive is really the only way to go when learning a language,” says Daniel, who knows from experience that trying to learn Japanese out of a book is sadly inadequate and only results in your best friend laughing at you and then refusing to speak English for the next three weeks, and okay, maybe that situation is a little specific to him, whatever.

“No, I mean – maybe I shouldn't take this job.”

Daniel looks up. “What?”

“I'm going to sound like an idiot,” he says.

He rolls his eyes. “Johnny, don't be ridiculous. The crew's probably like half American. And the half that *isn't* has to deal with Americans all the goddamn time – if someone says something you don't understand, the next guy over will be able to explain.”

Johnny remains lying there like a corpse and tucks his chin to look

over at him. “At my last job, the guy who was supposed to train me, Rich, he just spent the whole time telling jokes and bragging about women he'd had sex with.” His feet shift over the floor, restless, and his voice turns distant. “He was obsessed with breasts. It went on forever. And at the end of the week, I still didn't know what the hell I was supposed to be doing.”

Daniel bites back a smile. “Well, look on the bright side – if a guy on the shoot tries to talk to you about all the lovely qualities of the opposite sex, you probably won't understand a word he's saying.”

Johnny makes a sound of agreement and finally sits up. He rakes a hand over the back of his head and yawns, saying, “Well, Chozen, uh, Senpai said—” and then he jumps, startled, because Daniel has thrown his paperback at him. He looks down at the book in his lap and then transfers his bewildered stare to a wild-eyed Daniel. “What the fuck?”

He should really count himself lucky; Daniel was reading *Shōgun* a while back. *The Night Manager* has nothing on that page count.

“You are not,” says Daniel, struggling to keep his voice on the firm side of adamance, lest he be interpreted as hysterical, “calling him that.”

Johnny looks confused. “What, senpai? But Chozen said—”

“I forbid it,” he says quickly.

Johnny raises an eyebrow. “You *forbid* it?”

Unbelievable skepticism from a guy who Daniel once basically ordered into an orgasm. “Yes.” And then he relents – or tries to. “Look, you don't understand the connotation here – not your fault, you probably didn't get to Side B of that tape. But you – you just can't call him that, okay. Consider it, like, an order, a standing order.”

And one thing's for sure: Johnny considers it. He tosses the paperback aside and rolls forward onto his knees. He crawls a few feet and looms up in front of the armchair, like Jaws saying hello to a motorboat. His hands find Daniel's thighs and grip.

“An order, huh. What if I don't want to obey?”

Daniel is torn between letting this become a sex thing and his desperate need to make sure Johnny takes him seriously and never, ever utters those words again. He widens his knees as he thinks over

this dilemma, and Johnny presses in close.

“You like me giving you orders,” he points out, quite sensibly.

“Maybe not out of bed, I don't?” Johnny tilts his head. “You're kind of bad at it. Historically. I think you abuse the system.”

“We didn't have a system,” protests Daniel. “That was the real problem. If we had a system, then we'd both know our place in it and —”

“Oh, and what's my place?” asks Johnny.

Daniel finds it is easier to just show him.

Afterwards, Johnny props his head up with his elbow and asks, “This isn't going to be an ongoing thing, right? You and Chozen using me to fuck with each other, I mean.”

And his tone turns a little weird near the end, hinting at things Daniel resolutely refuses to hear or comprehend. He does not share.

“Not if you always take my side,” he offers.

Johnny rolls his eyes. “You know, *you're* the one who apparently slept with him that one time. How did that happen, by the way?”

Wouldn't he like to know! Daniel is taking it to his grave, and if Chozen doesn't do the same he'll meet his own earlier than expected. Even pacifists have their limits.

“I'm a gentleman. I don't talk about that kind of thing.” Johnny just looks at him, unblinking, and somehow Daniel is persuaded to add judiciously, “I *will* tell you – he kind of cried. But okay, okay, that's all I'll say, no more,” and then he really does say no more because Johnny is kissing him again.

Around noon, Johnny tries and fails to fix the lock on the bathroom door.

“I'll give you this, I'll be much more motivated to buy a new set now,” Daniel says, poking his head around from the kitchen where he is making them sandwiches. He observes the spread of dismantled knobs and screws and tools now arrayed down the hallway floor. “It's one

thing to have a door that doesn't lock, but it feels downright wrong to use the bathroom with a peephole in the door. I'm not into that kind of thing, I hope we can see eye-to-eye on this matter."

Johnny scowls at him and moves to put the knobs back in place.

"Sure do appreciate your helpful spirit, though," adds Daniel, consoling.

"I'm going out later," says Johnny, ignoring him. He squints and tilts the screwdriver, carefully twisting it between his fingers. "I'll stop by the hardware store."

And look, Daniel is all for Johnny going out and hanging with his straight friends to get his fill of being butch for a while. Okay? It's only, he's leaving in a few days for *six weeks.* And it turns out Daniel gets used to having him around really quickly?

"You're saying you're going to miss me," says Johnny, not stopping on his journey to the door later that afternoon.

Daniel stubbornly sticks in his way, walking backwards. He lets Johnny crowd him against the door and reaches up to bury his hands in his hair. He pulls him down into a deep kiss, figuring that'll be the end of this *leaving* nonsense, at least for a while.

Johnny's arms come up instantly, squeezing him like he knows Daniel is all his, like he's comfortable and confident with the knowledge – and then he lifts and swings him neatly out of the way so he can open the door and leave.

"*Wow*," says Daniel, blinking out at the bright afternoon after finding himself thus laid aside. "Seriously?"

The wide, happy grin and wink Johnny tosses over his shoulder linger in Daniel's mind afterwards, long after Johnny has climbed onto his bike and sped away down the street.

Daniel eventually shuts the door again and returns to his armchair. He grabs his book and puts his head back against the chair, pausing to consider the rest of the day.

He needs to call his mother at some point. Susan will probably be home in a few hours, dragging the drama of the day along behind her. Chozen is coming over for dinner (because he doesn't realize Mr. Miyagi and Yukie are also coming over). Soon enough, the house will

be full of people again and he won't have a single moment to himself.

With all this in mind, he resolves to enjoy the quiet while it lasts. He opens his book and starts to read, and life carries on.

FIN.

Chapter 101: Endnote: Art & Links

ART!



^^"Noise Breaking Johnny: a breakdown (hopefully)" by the fantastically talented Gj draws, who made many incredible works for this series.

I was extremely fortunate to have a few amazing artists make fun and gorgeous art for this fic while I was writing it, and then I was *extremely dumb*
bc I deleted my tumblr without remembering to grab links to all of it. I've tried to collect everything here. If anyone happens to notice anything missing, please let me know so I can tag it/include it!

All audio accompaniments to the fic can be found in one place here.

The final Noise Breaking playlist is here.

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by gjdraws (trq)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!